Sacrifice in Suburbia: American Novels as Troubled Tragedies

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Abstract

In this thesis I enlist the mimetic theory of René Girard to argue that three twentieth-century American novels — Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides,* Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm,* and Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* — are tragic texts. I demonstrate that these novels are participating in a tradition begun in sacrificial ritual and myth, in which a victim is blamed for a crisis and sacrificed for the benefit of a troubled community. I then argue that the tragic sacrifice is subverted and complicated by various textual means, subcategorising the novels as 'anti-tragedies' that present the characteristic features of tragedy but problematise its cathartic effects.

To ground my analysis, I establish an understanding of the American Dream as tragic, by examining three non-fiction texts on the Dream. I then briefly consider Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* as a play that deploys tragedy as discourse about the American Dream, before moving to a critical evaluation of the three novels.

I make a case for the legitimacy of considering the novel as part of the tradition of tragedy. I find that each novel contains a plethora of tragic tropes—those thematic features of ritual and myth identified by Girard, the treatment of which is significant in terms of cathartic effect. I argue that the novel has a unique capacity to problematise its own narrative and thus function as a 'self conscious' tragedy, and that this self-consciousness makes sacrifice the subject *of* the text rather than a structural element within it.

Girard's mimetic theory has been criticised for its lack of attention to gender and to the experiences of women. My analysis of the significance of the female bodies in Eugenides', Moody's, and Yates's novels extends Girardian scholarship in its consideration of women as scapegoats, and pays particular attention to gender in ways that Girard himself has not. I

present evidence that the narrative attitude towards select female bodies in the three novels is directly relevant to their eligibility as Girardian scapegoats.

Whereas previous Girardian scholarship has analysed novels for their treatment of one or more aspects of mimetic theory, such as mimetic desire or scapegoating, my thesis is the first work to analyse modern novels as tragedies: that is, as narratives in dialogue with the entire story-arc of ritual and myth. In doing so, my thesis strengthens the Girardian claim that tragedies are sacrificial scapegoat-rituals in narrative form. I then take Girard's minor remarks about the 'anti-mythical' nature of modern tragedies, and extend this speculation into a detailed analysis of how such modern tragedies enact their anti-tragic subversions.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Carly Osborn

September 2015

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Finally, my gratitude to the luminous René Girard (1923-2015), who passed away peacefully the same day this volume was prepared, and to whose legacy it offers a humble contribution. Vale.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my beloved grandparents

Jean Margaret Norman

(1920 – 2012)

&

Frederic George Norman

(1923 – 2013)

Introduction

George Steiner pronounced the death of tragedy in 1961. In a modern world without gods and heroes, he declared, tragedy cannot survive (*The Death of Tragedy* 10). He defended this view in 2004, maintaining that modernity is hostile to every element that is necessary to tragedy.[1] But despite such notices of its demise, tragedy refuses to depart the stage. In fact, in 2014 the *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* dedicated a special issue to tragedy, with an editorial titled 'The Urgency of Tragedy Now'. In it, Helene Foley and Jean Howard suggest that Steiner's 'nostalgia' for pre-modernity 'blinded him to the possibilities of the present': that tragedy is not only alive but vibrantly present as 'a resource with which to think, feel, and perform the urgencies of the times' (618, 617). This special issue presents a feast of scholarly perspectives on tragedy, as well as interviews with directors and playwrights, and recounts of modern productions that make plain the energy and relevance of tragedy today. From tales of performances of a re-fashioned Sophocles' *Antigone* in post-dictatorship Uruguay, to a comparison of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* with Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, to analyses of new works such as those by Carol Churchill, the issue shows that tragedy is a living and evolving genre.

Yet nowhere in this special edition is tragedy considered, or even mentioned, in the novel form. The editors mention 'tragedy as a written discourse' but only to differentiate dramatic scripts from stage performances. If tragedy is a vital, energetic genre in dialogue with the urgencies of modern times, why do we not look for it in that essentially modern genre, the novel? The *PMLA* editors note that their edition was necessarily selective, though in expressing their

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[1] In the 2004 article Steiner grudgingly allows for some modern texts to be categorised as 'tragedies' (his inverted commas), if they pass his definitive litmus test: 'ontological homelessness… is what tragedy is about' ("'Tragedy,' Reconsidered" 2). He still, however, defends his original thesis, and reserves the classification of true or 'absolute tragedy' for pre-modern works (2).

regrets at not being able to include certain topics or genres, they do not mention the novel (Foley and Howard 630). By contrast, in another major recent work on tragedy, *Sweet Violence*, Terry Eagleton examines the tragic novel in its own chapter, opening it with the acknowledgement that 'we speak of the comic novel, but rarely of the tragic one' (Eagleton 178).

In the coming chapters I, too, address this rarity by critically analysing the novels *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Ice Storm* by Rick Moody, and *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates as modern tragedies. I use the mimetic theory of René Girard to argue that these three twentieth century American novels are participating in a tradition, begun in sacrificial ritual and myth and continued in classical tragedy, in which a victim is blamed for a crisis and sacrificed for the benefit of a troubled community. I then argue that the tragic sacrifice in these novels is subverted and complicated by various textual means, producing 'anti-tragic' texts that present the characteristic features of tragedy but problematise the cathartic effects ascribed to it by Girard.

For the purposes of this thesis, I would clarify my terminology as follows. 'Tragedy' refers to the literary genre, primarily in its dramatic form, though I go on to argue that a novel may be a tragedy, in the sense of the genre evolving into new forms. 'The tragic' is a concept or worldview, described by Nietzsche, Eagleton and others in various ways (usually in relation to concepts such as fate, Gods, and suffering), and considered by Steiner a necessary condition for the production of tragic art (see Eagleton 11–30). For Girard, the 'tragic' worldview is primarily sacrificial, resolving communal crisis by the scapegoat-mechanism, following ritual and myth

(Girard, *VS* 331). Therefore when I describe something as 'tragic' in the Girardian sense, I am referring to a concept or narrative characterised by this sacrificial imperative.[2]

My concept of the 'anti-tragic' follows Girard's minor remarks about 'anti-myths', that is, texts with all the characteristic features of ritual and myth, but presented inversely, criticising rather than affirming the sacrificial imperative (Girard, *SG* 143). The 'anti-tragic' thus refers to this inverse perspective generally, and 'anti-tragedies' are those narrative texts that I identify as taking such a perspective. 'Anti-tragedies' are thus a special subcategory of tragedy, belonging fully, albeit subversively, to the tragic tradition.[3]

In Chapter 1, I outline the critical contexts relevant to my enquiry. Whereas previous Girardian scholarship has analysed other novels for their treatment of one or more aspects of mimetic theory, my thesis is the first to use Girardian theory to analyse any modern texts (novel or otherwise) as tragedies *per se*: that is, as narratives in dialogue with the entire story-arc of ritual and myth. I begin by reviewing existing work on tragedy and the novel, and the case for the legitimacy of considering tragedy as an evolving genre in which novels can and do participate. I then gather the threads of existing criticism that I use in my enquiry: Andrew McKenna's observations about the novel's tendency to critique modern competitive individualism (294); various critics' observations about the novel's unique ability to depict individual interiority; Cesareo Bandera's argument that the Judeo-Christian narrative tradition made possible a new kind of 'self-conscious' modern narrative (Bandera, *A Refuge of Lies* 129); Thomas Cousineau's suggestion that this self-consciousness creates an 'implicit contrast' between the narrator's

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[2] I also use 'tragic' where necessary as an adjective meaning 'pertaining to the literary/dramatic genre of tragedy'.

[3] Other scholars have occasionally used the term 'anti-tragic' to denote a subset of tragic drama, notably Ekbert Faas for whom 'anti-tragic' plays deny or question 'the tragic vision of death and suffering as somehow meaningful in the general order of things' (Faas 6). However, Faas does not engage with the connection between tragedy, myth and sacrificial ritual, and no scholar to my knowledge has used the term 'anti-tragedy' to denote the anti-sacrificial.

limited vision and the potential insight of the reader (*Ritual Unbound: Reading Sacrifice in Modernist Fiction* 5); and Michiel Heyns on the novel as demonstrating 'reciprocity of meaning' and self-consciously participating in narrative tradition (Heyns 273). It is in this critical context that I examine each of my chosen novels for the plethora of tragic tropes they contain, and in which I gather evidence that these novels are reflecting upon, and participating in, the tragic tradition.

In Chapter 1, I also review feminist criticism of and engagement with mimetic theory, an emerging field to which I aim to contribute with this thesis. I outline Martha Reineke's notions of 'corporeal ethics' and 'intimate domain' as a way to read textual attitudes to bodies, particularly women's bodies (*Intimate Domain* 175). My attention to the female bodies of the heroines in *The Virgin Suicides* and *Revolutionary Road* extends Girardian scholarship in its consideration of women as scapegoats, a theme which has received little previous attention from either Girard or Girardian scholars.

In Chapter 1.2, I summarise Girard's theory, from his earliest to most recent work. This summary focuses on Girard's key notion of the 'scapegoat-mechanism' as a cathartic sacrifice that is central to ritual, myth and tragedy, providing the theoretical framework for my demonstration that the novels I examine are participating in this cultural and narrative tradition.[4] Key components of this tradition, which I identify in the novels, include the following: mimetic crisis with its symptoms of contagion, decay, pollution, and undifferentiation; the mimetic crisis reflected in the environment; the failure of rites of passage and initiation; eligible scapegoats with characteristics such as marginality, monstrosity, and isolation; a sacrificial expulsion of scapegoats followed by their divinisation, and collective

[4] I am aware that *catharsis* is a highly contested term, the subject of centuries of critical debate as to definition, function, and value (see, for example, Else 225–226; Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* 184–201; Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth* 250–251; Munteanu 238–250; Murnaghan 755, 760–65). For the purposes of this thesis I do not engage in this debate, but rather I use *catharsis* in its Girardian sense.

catharsis and community reunification. I also draw attention to Girard's minor remarks about the 'anti-mythical' nature of modern tragedies influenced by Judeo-Christian narratives as the foundation for my coining of the terms 'anti-tragic' and 'anti-tragedy'. I define anti-tragedies as texts that are demonstrably part of the tragic tradition in both theme and structure, but which invert or subvert the typical tragic denouement by partially or wholly acquitting the tragic victim of culpability for his/her fate. Attributing an as-yet inadequately recognised importance to Girard's speculative remarks on modern tragic texts, and building from them a sustained analysis of the evolution of tragedy into the novel form, is an original contribution of this thesis to Girardian and literary scholarship.

My analysis of these three twentieth century American novels populated by wealthy suburbanites, who are striving for material acquisition and social status, is necessarily grounded in an exploration of the notion of the American Dream. Girard's observation that modern democracy promotes competitive individualism, while simultaneously thwarting individual progress by instituting a permanent mass of rivals, is the foundation for my characterisation of the American Dream as a catalyst for mimetic crisis. While Girard has commented on modern democracy generally, neither he nor any subsequent Girardian scholar has undertaken substantial analysis of American society and culture. Therefore, in Chapter 2 I analyse two non-fiction texts: Jim Cullen's *The American Dream*, and Andrew Delbanco's *The American Dream.* I analyse a section of each work for its discursive negotiations of the idea of America—the imagined American Dream—which the authors themselves describe as a sustaining myth. I suggest that a culture which builds a mythology of itself based on the competitive acquisition of objects of desire, and which attempts to locate transcendence in the mechanisms of this acquisitory system, is a culture that may produce narratives that perpetuate and problematise this mythology. By beginning with non-fictional texts, I aim to demonstrate a thematic

continuity between the imagined narrative of America in scholarly works about the American Dream and the microcosms of the Dream represented in my selected novel texts.

Before analysing the novels, I consider a text that is both their critical context and their creative precursor: Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. In Chapter 2.2, I argue that *Salesman*, like the non-fiction texts in Chapter 2.1, is an explicit commentary on the American Dream, and that like the novels I go on to examine, it uses the tropes and techniques of tragedy to achieve the subversive ends that mark what I call anti-tragedy. I contribute to the body of critical work that shows that *Salesman* is a significant element in the always-evolving tragic genre in twentieth century America, and suggest that *Salesman* is a highly significant cultural and literary precursor to the even more explicit 'anti-tragic' manouevres that I later identify in the three novels.

I then turn my analysis to the three novels, presenting them not in chronological order but according to their increasing degree of 'anti-tragicality'. Commencing with *The Virgin Suicides* in Chapter 3, I identify in the novel many of the themes that Girard locates in sacrificial ritual and myth. Using Martha Reineke's notion of the 'intimate domain' (*Intimate Domain* 175), I find the novel's cathartic effects to be undermined by the narrator's partial awareness of the victims as less than culpable for their fates. While the novel presents the reader with an intimate experience of the Lisbon sisters' bodies, the narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* never move beyond thinking of the girls as unapproachably Other, and thus cannot fully comprehend the system of sacrifice behind the tragic narrative. The reader, however, presented with 'intimate' insight, may follow the Cousineauian 'clues' to discover that the novel is self-conscious about sacrifice, and thus functioning as an 'anti-tragedy'.

The Ice Storm also engages repeatedly with the above tragic and Girardian tropes, and in Chapter 4 I argue that it is this engagement that places the novel in the tragic tradition, in contrast to the Ang Lee film adaptation that elides both crisis and catharsis. Given the novel's heavy burden of

references to imitative desire and competitive crisis, its persistent trope of contagion, and the depiction of genuinely destructive acts by its characters, I ask whether the novel contains any 'anti-tragic' potential rather than simply being a sacrificial tragedy. I then argue that such potential is manifest in this very excess of tragic signifiers: I argue that *The Ice Storm* is self-conscious in its 'reciprocity of meaning' with sacrificial myth and tragedy, protesting a little too much about the mythical crisis and the imperative to sacrifice. Further, the fact that the various acts of sacrifice fail to bring about redemption or restoration is an ironic dismantling of the tragic catharsis, as we shall see.

Revolutionary Road offers an opportunity to examine a text that is very self-conscious about staging, plays, and acting. In Chapter 5, I establish that, like the preceding novels, *Revolutionary Road* contains the hallmark features of Girard's pattern of tragedy: a narrative depicting protagonists caught in mimetic desire, which leads to a crisis that is interrupted by an act of violence against a scapegoat. I argue that the capacity of *Revolutionary Road* to stage or function as tragedy is closely bound up with its treatment of plays themselves, and here I find additional evidence of 'anti-tragic' power in the novel's reflexivity about play-acting: it not only depicts characters whose everyday identities are highly theatrical, but also opens with the depiction of a failed staging of a theatrical performance. This multi-layered effect of imagined characters pretending to be imagined characters invites an analysis that is always mindful of the novel itself as a performance, demonstrating that 'self-consciousness' which I argue may be deployed as a subversion of sacrificial narrative. The closing pages of *Revolutionary Road* make this subversion explicit, as the narrative perspective moves away from those engaged in cathartic, mythical retellings of the story, and instead invites readers to share the interiority of those who have rejected such catharses. Additionally, I consider the significance of April's female body to her role as scapegoat, and argue that her act of self-harm is a rejection of her community's definition of herself in terms of her reproductive system. I read this rejection as an embodied

problematisation of those systems of difference upon which ritual, myth and tragedy rest, and thus as a subversion of the tragic catharsis.

Throughout these chapters, I aim to demonstrate that one of the many potential functions of modern tragedy is the re-enactment of patterns of myth and sacrificial ritual, as suggested by Girard's theory. This re-enactment and its sacrificial catharsis may be subverted by what I call 'anti-tragic' texts, which present all the characteristic features of tragedy but in such a way as to call the sacrifice of the scapegoat into question. As we shall see, *The Virgin Suicides*, *The Ice Storm*, and *Revolutionary Road* participate in a persistent imagining of the American Dream as tragic, a culture in crisis and in need of catharsis. At the same time, in various ways, each of the novels is ambiguous in its treatment of the characters and communities in crisis. The conventional guilt of the tragic scapegoat is undermined, and the novels' self-consciousness about sacrifice allows the reader to resist the tragic catharsis. In these ways, I demonstrate that these three modern American novels are both participating in and problematising the evolving tradition of tragedy.

1. Critical Contexts

1.1. Existing Scholarship

My thesis builds upon existing work studying tragedy, the novel genre, Girardian theory, and the place of women in the above.

Tragedy

What is tragedy, and what does it do? Aristotle provided an early answer in his *Poetics*, in which he lays out a neat and prescriptive schema for tragedy. A tragedy, he asserted, is a work of imitative art in the dramatic form, depicting serious matters, telling a complete story using rhythm and harmony, arousing feelings of pity and fear in order to effect their 'proper purgation'—*catharsis*. In addition to this crucial and highly contested term, Aristotle bequeathed to literary criticism a useful terminology of tragedy, of dramatic *catastrophe* brought about by a mistake caused by some inherent flaw or ignorant error of the hero (*hamartia*), leading to unfortunate reversals of intended effect (*peripeteia)* and thence to the climactic moment of too-late recognition (*anagnorisis*) (Aristotle 21, 34, 41).

But much has happened, on the tragic stage and in the world at large, *since* Aristotle, and his *Poetics* makes scant reference to what happened *before* tragedy—its origins in ritual and myth. This thesis aims to draw a thread from those ritual origins to some modern forms of tragedy, using the work of French-American theorist René Girard. In Girard's model, Aristotle's favoured Greek tragedies are part of a long tradition of spectacles of sacrifice, and the cathartic effect of tragedy is no mere artistic pleasure but a crucial mechanism of human culture—upon which I will later elaborate.

Girard is, of course, just one of many since Aristotle who have contributed definitions and ascribed purposes to tragedy. Terry Eagleton, in his meditation on tragedy, *Sweet Violence*, undertakes a survey of those voices, whose attitudes and understandings are highly varied. Some, like Schopenhauer or Paul Allen, look for morality in tragedy: a hero's renunciative sacrifice, an 'uplifting' denouement that acts upon the emotions and stimulates understanding and virtue (Eagleton 4). Others uphold the rules of Aristotle, stipulating high-status protagonists, deserved falls caused by *hamartia*, and the lightbulb-moment of *anagnorisis*.[5] But where, Eagleton justly asks, do such classical limitations leave Willy Loman, or Hedda Gabler? Perhaps, he speculates, we may decide that tragedy is not possible in the modern age, as does Walter Kerr, who cites 'freedom' as tragedy's defining theme and argues that since Darwin and Enlightenment determinism, man is no longer free and thus no longer tragic (6–7).

A more considered, though not necessarily convincing, argument against the possibility of modern tragedy is George Steiner's seminal *The Death of Tragedy*, first published in 1961. Steiner marks the final death throes of tragedy in Shakespeare, arguing that the modern era is inhospitable to tragic art. He primarily blames the intersections of the 'radical critique of the notion of guilt' (*The Death of Tragedy* 127) of Romanticism, and the modern 'triumph of rationalism and secular metaphysics' (193), as deadly to tragedy—guilt and gods both being necessary to the tragic *hamartia*, the result of cruel but inexorable Fate. Steiner finally declares that 'tragedy is that form of art which requires the intolerable burden of God's presence. It is now dead because His shadow no longer falls upon us as it fell on Agamemnon or Macbeth or Athalie' (353).

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[5] Eagleton refers here to Horace, followed by Johnson and Corneille, who stuck to the ancient formula of 'crimes of the great', and to Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives* and Francis Fergusson's *The Idea of a Theater* as privileging *anagnorisis* (Eagleton 4–6).

As Eagleton notes, Nietzsche went further than Steiner, not simply noting but mourning the loss of the shadow of the pagan gods. For Nietzsche, myth and tragedy were desirable because they exalted and perpetuated violent sacrifice of deserving victims. He abhorred the rationalist ethics of modernity: faith in logical enquiry rather than mysterious instinct, coupled with the virtue-seeking 'slave morality' of Christianity—conditions fatal to tragic art. Tragedy, for Nietzsche, is 'counter-Enlightenment' (Eagleton 18):

> Tragedy has died because fate, the gods, heroism, mythology and a proper appreciation of the darkness of human hearts have ruinously yielded in our own time to chance, contingency, democracy, rationality, religious disenchantment and a callow progressivism. (Eagleton 20)

Yet, against the Nietzsche-and-Steiner perspective, many critics have disputed this readiness to commit tragedy to the grave. Eagleton lists Raymond Williams and Krieger as among those for whom the modern worldview is tragic, perhaps even *too* tragic, and for whom the function of modern tragedy is to bring shape and order to the overwhelming tragic reality of the present (Eagleton 10). Likewise, Thomas Van Laan calls for an 'antidote to the myth' of tragedy's demise, in the form of studies of nineteenth and twentieth century texts to discover the ways they 'continue the tradition of tragedy even as they modify it' whilst still providing 'pleasure proper to tragedy' (Van Laan 27). Van Laan enumerates some of the critical suggestions on what this 'proper' function of tragedy might be, such as Reiss's notion that tragedy is 'simply a series of theatrical attempts to invent and grasp what a succession of different periods experienced as the inexpressible' (28) and Krieger's statements on the 'cathartic principle' as 'evidence of the need in tragedy to have dissonance exploded, leaving only the serenity of harmony behind' (28). Such concepts of modern tragedy are fairly broad, if not to say vague—to 'grasp the inexpressible', to 'explode dissonance'. Somewhat more concretely, Rebecca

Bushnell suggests that tragedy's enduring power in the modern world is its ability to 'evoke a culture's conceptions and questions about authority and the extent to which we determine the course of our own lives' (Bushnell 4).

Girard, likewise, argues against the death-of-tragedy notion, but goes well beyond the broad statements of the critics exampled above. Girard's theory of tragedy is formidably particular, as tragedy forms part of a complex schema that seeks to explain not only tragedy but human culture as a whole. Modern tragedies can thus be read as part of his schema, and the function or purpose of such tragedies considered as part of the culture in which they are produced and consumed. In this thesis I will read seven texts through the lens of Girardian theory, in the context of modern American culture: beginning with three discursive texts on the notion of the American Dream, then a modern American stage tragedy, and ultimately a reading of three late-twentieth century American novels. I will be tracing the characteristic threads of Girardian tragedy through all seven texts, in order to consider what a twentieth century American tragedy might be, and what it might do.

Can a Novel be a Tragedy?

Girard's statements regarding the ritual-function of tragedy raise the question of which modern texts, if any, are performing this role. I will attempt to demonstrate that my chosen novels are participating in the tradition of tragedy and myth, and performing a tragic function—or perhaps an inverted, anti-tragic one, or something in between that is nevertheless classifiably part of the discourse of tragedy. My contention that the tragic function may be equally performed by a novel as by a stage drama is a significant contribution to current debates on the form and function of tragedy.

Bushnell's *Companion*, one of the more substantial collections on tragedy written in recent years, explicitly focuses on tragedy in Western culture, and as a dramatic genre. When acknowledging this in the introduction, Bushnell concedes that

> One could imagine composing a very different volume of chapters on the notion of the "tragic" more broadly construed… beyond the narrower designation of tragic theater to include all performative expressions, including opera, music, film, and dance. (Bushnell 9)

Yet even this 'broad' construction is limited to 'performative expressions'; the novel is not included. Introducing another major collection on tragedy, a *PMLA* special issue, the editors (Helene Foley and Jean Howard) consider 'the difference between tragedy as performance and tragedy as text' (Foley and Howard 620), but by this they mean only the experience of reading a dramatic script as opposed to watching the play staged, as for example our frequent experience of Ancient Greek tragedy. They posit questions such as 'What does it mean to see suffering enacted, as opposed to reading scripts of suffering?' (620), with interest in the spectacular and visceral aspects of tragedy on the stage—but neither their introduction nor any subsequent essays in the volume consider the possibilities or effects of tragedies in the novel form, tragedies that are innately no more than words-on-a-page.

Georg Lukacs and his student Lucien Goldmann each traced and analysed the rise of the novel in the context of nineteenth century Europe and America, and the social changes associated with post-revolutionary modern individualism. Lukacs split literary texts according to their production in a pre-capitalist past or capitalist present; Goldmann built upon this foundation and conceived of the novel as modern competitive individualism embodied in a textual form:

> The novel form seems to me, in effect, to be the transposition on the literary plane of everyday life in the individualistic society created by market production. There is a rigorous homology between the literary form of the novel... and the everyday relation between man and commodities in general, and by extension between men and other men, in a market society. (Goldmann 7)

As relationships between persons were increasingly shaped by capitalist forces, commodities increasingly become status symbols in addition to useful goods in their own right. Goldmann even argues that monetary value becomes a shorthand for intrinsic personal value, as in, 'what am I worth?' (Goldmann 24). The Marxist arguments contained herein are outside my scope of enquiry, but the Girardian echoes are of central relevance: acquisition becomes a quest for personal value, and other members of the community are rivals in that quest. Richard Rorty, in his *Essays*, likewise notes that the novel is 'the characteristic genre of democracy, the genre most closely associated with the struggle for freedom and equality' (Rorty 68). But Andrew McKenna has pointed out that the above observers, unlike Girard, have not explicitly noted the novel's tendency to *critique* modern competitive individualism, nor the fact that modern democracy promotes such individualism while simultaneously thwarting individual progress by instituting a permanent mass of rivals. McKenna, following de Tocqueville, describes democratic America as 'nourish[ing] forms of competition that erase differences among individuals' (McKenna 4).

In his essay on 'Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens', Rorty elevates novelists and novels as superior to theorists and theories, as able to explore 'detail, diversity, and accident'; he extols the unique capacity of the novel to switch perspectives and inhabit multiple minds, its ability to depict a wide variety of viewpoints in human interactions.[6] Thus the novel genre is well placed

[6] Rather than diametrically opposing 'theory' and 'narrative', McKenna suggests that the Girardian approach is to 'see the novel as a more or less explicit theory of human relations' (McKenna 3).

to critique the modern, mimetic state of affairs because of its capacity to critique and undermine the very tale it is telling. Girard's early work in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* focuses on the novel form's unique ability to depict individual interiority, and thus to reveal and critique the inner workings of the mimetic crisis. Perhaps more so than the drama, the novel can invite the reader to share the interiority of a particular character and his or her point of view. Perhaps the novel genre is uniquely suited to depicting the rebellion of an individual mind, and thus the shift in narrative perspective, away from the act of scapegoating, and thus able to potently enact the subversive power of the anti-tragic.

Terry Eagleton considers the novel—which he describes as 'inescapably parasitic' on its generic ancestors (Eagleton 183)—as a possible modern replacement for, or even 'antidote to' classical tragedy (185). He notes Steiner's observation that 'the history of the decline of serious drama is, in part, that of the rise of the novel' (qtd in 187). He suggests that the modern realist novel can undermine or avoid the sacrificial crisis of tragedy because its task is to trace the complex chains of causality which weave themselves into the present, thus letting explanation take the place of condemnation; *tout comprendre est tout pardonner* (184). But while one might argue that condemnation is the habit of religion, and 'explanation' the legacy of rationalism, a Girardian analysis suggests that explanation takes the place of condemnation in the modern realist novel in part because of what Girard calls the 'Scriptural force of disruption' of the Gospel narratives working upon the modern imagination (Girard, "Mimesis" 2). To this we may add that condemnation (i.e. the persecutor-text) is not essential to tragedy, but simply one perspective from which the tragic narrative can be told—the other, of course, being the victim-text, which explains the sacrificial mechanism but does not pardon the wrongdoers. This thesis will posit that the modern novel is influenced by both of these perspectives, and derives some of its dramatic tension from the conflict between the two.

Eagleton recognises some of this tension when he goes on to quote Henry James:

> Henry James writes that 'the old dramatists... had a simpler civilisation to represent—societies in which the life of man was in action, in passion, in immediate and violent experience. These things could be put upon the playhouse boards with comparatively little sacrifice of their completeness and their truth. Today we're so infinitely more reflective and complicated and diffuse...' [...] because of this we need a narrative voice-over, which the novel can give us with less strain than the modern drama, which will help us unravel these subtleties... (Eagleton 191)

Eagleton acknowledges the complications and tensions of the modern consciousness but does not argue causes[7], simply classifying Ancient Greek culture as 'simpler' and modern culture as 'complicated'. Girard, of course, explains this shift in terms of the problematisation of the scapegoat-mechanism, and the tension between the sacrificial and the Scriptural in modern Western culture. If, as Girard claims and I will likewise contend, there can be no 'undisrupted' scapegoat-mechanism in the modern world, and if the ritualised scapegoat-mechanism was eventually performed on the tragic stage rather than the altar, then perhaps there can be no undisrupted modern tragedy. This is not to suggest that modern disrupted tragedy cannot take place in the dramatic form, but that the novel may be a suitable form for treating the subtleties of such disrupted narratives.

Girardian Literary Scholarship

There is a growing body of criticism using Girardian theory, much of which can be found in the journal *Contagion*, which is dedicated to the application of Girard's theories across a broad

[7] Eagleton has elsewhere discussed the causes of complexity in modern culture and consciousness, but does not do so here or elsewhere in direct relation to the powers of the novel genre.

field of disciplines, and in an increasing number of academic books, most notably the MSU press series *Studies in Violence, Mimesis, & Culture*. Girard's insights have been applied to anthropology, neuroscience, politics, and economics, and to theology, currently the discipline to have produced the greatest quantity of work on Girard.[8][9]

Literary criticism applying Girardian theory has been mostly limited to repetitions of the work by Girard in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*; that is, identifying fictional works which make plain the triangular nature of desire. As Garth Cornwell writing on Raymond Carver puts it, 'with this essay, I plan to add Raymond Carver to Girard's pantheon of the undeceived' (Cornwell 344). Other critics eager to add to the Girardian canon of 'novelistic' authors and filmmakers include Simon De Keukelaere on Virginia Woolf, Ian Dennis on Byron, Andrew McKenna on Fellini, and Matthew Packer on Dos Passos's U.S.A. trilogy, which he described as 'a puzzle--one the following discussion attempts to solve in terms of mimetic desire' (Packer 215).

Some literary scholars have gone beyond this ubiquitous enthusiasm for detecting triangular desire. A substantial and foundational work of literary criticism utilising Girardian theory is Sandhor Goodhart's *Sacrificing Commentary*. Goodhart's argument is that literature *itself* is a kind of theory or criticism, and that it differs radically from what we call criticism by being anti-mythical.[10] In this dichotomy, 'criticism' is 'thoroughly mythic in constitution' while 'great literature' is 'constitutionally anti-mythic', criticising 'the same myths that criticism reconstructs' (251). If myth is the original material from which both literature and criticism are born, then the

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[8] For example, the work of Gans, Garrels, Oughoulian, Dumouchel and Dupuy.

[9] Unsurprisingly, such work often focuses on the theology of the Crucifixion and notions of sacrifice and atonement, for instance Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly's *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* and James G. Williams's *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence*.

[10] In fact, Goodhart argues that a Girardian sacrifice takes place in which 'literature' is first made sacred by literary criticism, then takes the nature of a 'monstrous double of its own critical pretensions' and is then expelled by criticism as a poisonous scapegoat, thus legitimising criticism (*Commentary* 252).

latter continues the logic of the myth while the former criticises and dismantles it (252). In Goodhart's analysis, literature is itself a form of critical reading that expounds and explains the themes which literary criticism attempts to explore but instead re-mystifies, preventing true critical enquiry by perpetuating the accusations and violence of myth and sacrificial culture. Since 'great literature', in the Girardian sense, contains the dangerous seed of awareness of the scapegoat-mechanism, 'criticism responds as it has learned to respond in the face of any dangerous mimetic contagion: sacrificially' (78). According to this schema only literature itself can interpret both literature and culture, questioning and unravelling the distinctions and categories of criticism, and rebutting the scapegoat-accusations that criticism repeats and reinforces.

Regarding tragedy, Goodhart traces his literature-criticism opposition from the early philosophers through to postmodern theory and deconstruction, and posits that the Greek tragedians were questioning the sacrificial system while the philosophers perpetuated it. This view is mirrored by Michelle Zerba in *Tragedy and Theory* , in which she places tragic practice and philosophy in opposition, arguing that tragic drama resists, withstands and complicates the trite moral and rational categories of philosophy. Terry Eagleton, too, comes close to a Goodhartian reading when he describes philosophy as 'seeking to repress and exclude the conflicts which tragic practice reveals', 'neutralizing its moral outrage' (Eagleton 19), though unlike Goodhart he does not stipulate *what* exactly such conflict and outrage is about, i.e. the sacrifice of the scapegoat.

Goodhart thus urges a 'non-Platonic and consequently non-Aristotelian reading of literature' (*Commentary* 263), reading Sophocles (*pace* Nietzsche) as an iconoclast philosopher who resists logic and embraces prophesy. Goodhart establishes two categories of logic: the 'synchronic logic' of myth, philosophy and criticism, which defines things differentially and in opposition to

one another, and the 'diachronic logic' of literature, which is sequential and 'prophetic', revealing 'more of the same', and predicting the tragic denouement in its sacrificial inevitability. For Goodhart, literature is useful as a kind of prophetic Scripture, a revelation of the causes of humanity's ills (scapegoating mechanisms) 'in order that we may gain the option of giving them up if we so choose' (253). He proceeds to locate such insights in the works of Sophocles and Shakespeare, in Torah narratives such as the stories of Jonah and Job, and finally in the witness accounts of Holocaust survivors.[11]

Goodhart's analysis of Sophoclean and Shakespearean tragedy supports the notion, gestured towards by Girard and upon which I am building, that tragedy may perform a ritual function that is anti-mythic and which disrupts, rather than delivers, sacrificial catharsis-by-narrative. Its final chapter speaks to twentieth century texts in its theme 'Reading After Auschwitz', but its focus is ethical rather than textual, as Goodhart imagines a way of reading that is illuminated by the notion of 'witness': that post-Shoah 'it is no longer possible to conceive of the human without conceiving at the same time of murder' (*Commentary* 253) — that the sacrificial mechanism at the heart of culture was laid horrifyingly bare and can never be re-concealed. In such a world, reading becomes a 'manner of engaging the witness borne around us' by texts that interpret human interaction through this lens, and which make the reader aware of his/her complicity in the sacrificial system and ethically bound to renounce it (253).[12]

While Goodhart extends Girard's commentary on the insights of 'great literature' by contrasting them with the ostensible blindness of criticism, his analysis is limited by his own 'synchronic', dichotomic categorisation. He concedes the possibility of mythic literature but

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[11] Goodhart has much to say about the Holocaust as revelatory of the sacrificial system, but these discussions are outside the scope of this thesis.

[12] Goodhart has since deepened and developed these ideas of the prophetic and the ethical, notably in his recent book (*Prophetic Law*).

does not—perhaps cannot, without undermining his thesis—explore this notion or suggest fruitful examples. Likewise, he allows for the existence of anti-mythic criticism but is elusive about its nature and limits, despite the fact that his own book must form some part of such a corpus. I propose to complicate Goodhart's analysis by considering modern tragic texts as paradoxical, containing both mythical and anti-mythical forces and producing complex catharses for both characters and readers. Furthermore I am myself attempting a work of anti-mythical criticism, which operates without making literature either sacred or sacrificed. Goodhart's *Sacrificing Commentary* does not address modern tragedy, despite its reflections on twentieth century reading, nor does it consider American literature. Goodhart's focus—further developed in his later works—is on the ethical and religious implications of literature for contemporary life and thought, whereas I remain focused on the texts themselves: in what ways may these modern American novels be said to be functioning as Girardian tragedies? How do these texts perform a mythical or anti-mythical function and what complicates their operation? For consideration of these questions, I look to scholarship that considers particular fictional texts themselves.

While there has been some Girardian literary scholarship that considers modern literature, it has not explicitly concerned itself with the notion of tragedy. Gary Ciuba's *Desire, Violence, and Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction*, for example, is a Girardian examination of works by Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, and Walker Percy. Ciuba's work is part cultural, part literary analysis. He begins by noting the thematic prominence of honour, shame, and violence in Southern culture, and suggests that each of these finds explanation in the Girardian schema of desire, rivalry and scapegoating. He then uses selected Southern literary works to support his argument, and to suggest that those Southern writers apprehended, at least in part, the mimetic causes of their characters' violent crises, and that they are critiquing Southern culture as part of Girard's 'novelistic' tradition.

Naturally the issue of slavery is important to Ciuba's exploration, and he underpins his socio-cultural analysis by acknowledging that slavery 'minimized the differences based on wealth, gender, or social status that might lead to [mimetic rivalry]' (Ciuba 29) and provided a subclass of sacrificable scapegoats. Post-Civil War, he claims, the South simply replaced slavery with segregation as its sacrificial system, bolstered by religious fanaticism that epitomised Girard's conception of institutional Christianity in denial of its own Scriptures and determined to perpetuate sacrificial violence.

Ciuba uses each of his chosen writers to demonstrate textual transparency about a particular aspect of Girardian theory. Katherine Anne Porter's *Miranda* stories illustrate mimetic desire. Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away* and Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* are demonstrations of rivalry, mimetic crisis and scapegoat-mechanism, in which O'Connor and McCarthy write indictments of violence, and direct their heroes to move towards nonviolence—or fail to do so, and become victims of contagious violence themselves in ways so ironic as to '[send] up the entire scapegoating mechanism' (Ciuba 135). Finally, Walker Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome* is held up as a portrait of undifferentiation, and incidentally of the failure of traditional Southern Christianity to fight the mimetic contagion. For Ciuba, Southern literature has the same 'novelistic' power that Girard finds in Proust, Cervantes and Dostoyevsky: the power to reveal the mimetic mechanism at the heart of culture.[13]

Ciuba's interest in Flannery O'Connor is shared by Jeremiah Alberg, who in *Beneath the Veil of the Strange Verses: Reading Scandalous Texts* reads Nietzsche, Rousseau, and O'Connor for instances of 'scandal': a treatment of violence that both appeals to our sense of vengeance and repulses our sense of compassion, inviting the reader to look 'beneath the surface' and read

[13] Alberg and Ciuba's interest Southern literature has been shared by a small handful of other scholars eager to reflect upon the South as a hotbed of religion and rivalry (see Barge; Bollinger; Allen).

with a 'forgiveness' that escapes or reveals the mechanisms of violence (Alberg 5). The works of Flannery O'Connor are held up as examples of such narratives that present rivalry and violence as mimetic, revealing and even mocking the scapegoat-mechanism. Alberg's method differs from a hermeneutics of suspicion as he deliberately attempts to reconcile surface and depth, presence and absence to enable a reading that breaks down such sacrificial dichotomies. This 'hermeneutics of forgiveness' aims to locate in texts something that will 'help us in [our] struggle by teaching us how to interpret or understand' rivalry and violence (120). For Alberg, following Goodhart, such texts become secular Scriptures, useful for instruction.

Alberg and Ciuba's works go beyond the triangle-hunting of those who seek only to locate mimetic desire in literature, as they identify parts of the larger Girardian process—from desire to rivalry to violent sacrifice—in their chosen narratives. However, they remain within the spirit of *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* in that their project is to hold up certain authors, or texts, as 'novelistic', revealing truth rather than perpetuating romantic fantasy. Of more utility to my project are three works of Girardian scholarship that consider not simply *if* modern novels are anti-mythical, but *how* they might manage to be so.

Such questions are central to the project of Cesáreo Bandera, begun in his early work *The Sacred Game*, and developed more fully in *A Refuge of Lies: Reflections on Faith and Fiction*. While Bandera's work opens a way for enquiry into modern tragedy, he does not pursue it himself. Rather, in an impressively-scoped corpus, Bandera extends Girard's discussion of the uniqueness of Scriptural narratives to a consideration of how Western fiction in general became 'desacralised' and increasingly concerned with truth. Bandera looks at Auerbach's seminal *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature,* and its schema of difference 'between the two basic approaches to the textual representation of reality in Western culture', as typified respectively in the work of Homer and the books of the Old Testament, approaches which had

a 'determining influence' upon subsequent Western literature (*A Refuge of Lies* 4). This crucial difference is the attitude of each text towards the notion of truth: Auerbach describes the Bible's 'passionate' concern for the truth of its narratives—a concern not shared by Homer, whose text displays an 'apparently complete lack of interest in historical reality' (2). Auerbach posited that Homer's work bore no relation to religion, assuming that if Homer had considered his work religious rather than poetic he would have been more concerned with the truth of his reports. Bandera counters this assumption using Girard's theory regarding archaic religion and myth, and the *necessity* in myth of concealing the truth of the scapegoat-mechanism. In this view, the 'unconcern' for truth in Homer is not merely poetic whimsy, but an essential part of the mimetic system, which would give rise to few textual exceptions before the influence of Judeo-Christian Scripture came to bear upon Western literature.

This influence, according to Bandera, was not straightforward, but rather occurred through an expulsive mechanism of its own, in which classical narratives such as epic and drama were expelled by a growing culture of 'desacralisation'. Bandera traces the treatment of the sacred from ancient and classical epics, through to the early Christian era, then the medieval world, and into early modernity, the incidence of the novel, and the 'desacralising' efforts of Marx. Bandera (following Girard) considers Christianity as a desacralising force that made man responsible for his own violence, and ultimately for himself, making possible the secular culture of the Renaissance and beyond. He describes a 'theological uneasiness' towards literary fiction through the centuries of establishing Western Christianity, as 'the Christian spirit' found the old forms of sacrificial narrative 'profoundly incompatible' with 'the inner logic of the Christian revelation' (Bandera, *A Refuge of Lies* 129). The Christian expulsion of sacred violence ushers in secular rationality and a new kind of literary fiction—modern narratives which luxuriate in self-consciousness and freedom from the constraint of classical taboos that limited philosophical thought to conceal the mechanisms of mimesis and sacrifice. At the climax of this process, he

argues, the first modern novel emerged —*Don Quixote*. Bandera argues that Quixote is a literary character of unprecedented nature: neither hero nor antihero, as Cervantes breaks the Aristotelian distinction between 'poetry of praise' and 'poetry of blame', finally leading his mimetically-obsessed fantasist to a deathbed conversion in which he clearly sees reality, or truth, and rejects mimetic desire (129). This notion of modern ambiguity and paradox, present because of the tension and interaction between sacrificial and Scriptural narrative influence (upon which I will later elaborate), is crucial to my reading of twentieth century novels, as is Bandera's notion of the modern novel as self-conscious and concerned with truth and revelation. However, Bandera leaves the notion of 'tragedy' in antiquity, a label for a past and purely sacrificial art form, and he does not consider twentieth century texts, nor American ones.[14]

In his book *Ritual Unbound,* Thomas Cousineau takes the notion of 'self-consciousness' and applies it to twentieth century novels. Cousineau reads Henry James's *The Turn Of The Screw*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness*, Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* as 'quintessentially modernist' novels that offer a 'defense of a solitary protagonist who has become the target of communal violence' (*Ritual Unbound* 4). He argues that the progress from ancient myths to modern fiction is not one of steady positive progress from scapegoating to the renunciation of violence, but rather that many of the great modern novels actually perpetuate the practice of scapegoating. They do this by first 'unbinding the victims' from the oppression of their false accusers (4), but then turning blame and aggression onto those accusers themselves, creating a new category of scapegoat

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[14] Bandera considers Aristotle's notion of tragedy and finds it 'misleading', arguing that the *Poetics* discusses tragedy as an autonomous art form with no connection to the ritual practices from which it came, denying and concealing sacrificial mechanisms. He prefers the insight of Plato, reading *Laws*' injunction against poets as a prophylaxis against mingling religion with secular activity, which might lead to the dangerous unmasking of the sacred.

who deserves to be expelled. For example, in *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway accuses everybody else of exploiting Gatsby, depicting himself as the only one who is innocent of Gatsby's death, the only one whose motives were pure and non-rivalrous. By failing to accept a measure of culpability for Gatsby's death (Cousineau notes that it is Nick who brings Gatsby and Daisy together), Nick reinstates the sacrificial system rather than demystifying it and coming to a place of awareness of collective violence (128).

However, Cousineau argues that demystification *is* available to the reader, as the text provides more than the narrator's point of view:

> Each of these novels is constructed in such a way as to create an implicit contrast between the narrator's merely ostensible demystification of scapegoating, which is contaminated by an unpurged mythic residue, and the genuine demystification undertaken—to the degree that we succeed in seeing beyond the distorting interference of the narrator—by the events of the novel. (*Ritual Unbound* 5)

The narrator may still be seeing events through myth-tinted glasses, but the text contains clues that this is a 'distorting interference', which the reader may resist (*Ritual Unbound* 5). Cousineau argues that *The Great Gatsby* contains ample evidence that Nick has been an important cogwheel in the machinations that led to Gatsby's death. The 'pattern [of] events… serves throughout the novels themselves as a silent challenge to the scapegoating discourse of the narrator' (5). The reader may reject Nick's attempts to shift the blame, and instead appreciate and repudiate the system of mimetic desire, rivalry and violence that *all* the characters have been caught up in.

For Cousineau, the novel genre is of crucial significance here. He argues that the 'aesthetic form' of these modernist novels is characterised by 'self-consciousness' (*Ritual Unbound* 13)—not on the part of the narrator, but on the part of the novel itself, 'tipping the wink' to the

reader who is not supposed to forget that she is reading a deliberately constructed fictional text with all that this implies. The narrator may be unreliable; the text may contain deliberate allusions to other texts, including myths; and patterns may be recognisable by the reader standing outside the text, which the characters inside the text are unable to see. Cousineau argues that this self-consciousness is a key feature that allows the modern novel to make scapegoating the subject *of* fiction rather than a structural element within it, facilitating 'the critical movement from the mythical to the non-mythical representation of the scapegoat' (13).

Similarly, in *Expulsion in the Nineteenth-Century Novel,* Michiel Heyns argues that five realistic novels (*Mansfield Park, Our Mutual Friend, Daniel Deronda, Lord Jim,* and *The Golden Bowl*) create an 'oppositional narrative' by appealing to the readers' consciousness of the scapegoat-mechanism. Utilising Girardian terminology, he argues that we must 'distinguish the scapegoat in the text from the scapegoat of the text' (Heyns 43 quoting Girard, *SG* 199), a distinction that enables the reader to separate himself/herself from the 'more or less complacent little societies' within the novel, and instead participate in a 'narrative community' that is generated 'between the reader and [the] narrative' (Heyns 52).

Key to his approach is the notion that novels, and narrative generally, are subject to sacrificial tendencies because of the 'the narrative requirement of closure' (Heyns 52). If neat endings are to be delivered, then it will be necessary to expel 'such characters as threaten the desired equilibrium of [the] community' (52). But Heyns argues that the novel also contains the capacity to undermine such sacrificial process, in its power to appeal to the reader's awareness of the narrator as a) fallible, and b) fictional.

Taking *Mansfield Park* as his first example, Heyns argues that Jane Austen invites her readers to a 'complex contract' in which 'imaginative participation' is necessary, 'in order for the reader to understand and evaluate the action and the narrator's comments' (Heyns 17). Mary Crawford's

expulsion from the community of the novel may thus be read as a scapegoating, and Fanny Price as less innocent than a conservative reading might allow. Since the events of the novel are always shown to us from Fanny's point of view, the reader may choose not to take her judgements at face value. Fanny's 'lapses from self-knowledge', he argues, render her 'comically fallible' (84), and this fallibility becomes 'a standard whereby to judge the events of the novel' (84). The reader is therefore 'privileged in having access both to the fictional community… and to the narrative community' existing between text and reader, a space in which subversive readings may be discovered or determined (53). The text, in Heyns's words, acquires 'the status of witness rather than exhibit', requiring attention to its 'way of speaking' in order to fully understand its meaning (17). He moves on to make similar arguments regarding *Our Mutual Friend, Daniel Deronda, Lord Jim,* and *The Golden Bowl,* casting such novels as narratives that depict 'a culture that cannot afford to examine its own meanings', in a self-conscious and ironic gesture in which 'the depiction itself constitutes that examination … so carefully avoided by the characters in the novel' (49).

Attention to the novel's 'way of speaking' includes attention to the novel form's 'developing awareness of its own processes' (Heyns 270), and for Heyns this awareness is manifested in the novel form's *reciprocity of meaning*: its self-awareness as 'belonging to the same tradition' as past narratives. For Heyns, novels are reciprocal statements in a continuing conversation, reflecting upon one another and on other genres: 'in doing so they reopen narratives previously declared closed' (273). This idea is crucial to my thesis, as I will argue that my chosen novels are to some extent self-conscious about tragedy and myth, re-opening the Girardian tragic narrative that ends with the scapegoat-sacrifice, and refashioning it into subtler and problematic shapes.

While Heyns declares that *Expulsion in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* is grounded in Girardian theory, he makes no mention of any aspect of Girard's theory other than the dynamic of

communal scapegoating. Mimesis, desire, ritual and myth are nowhere mentioned, and Girard's rich exploration of the scapegoat-mechanism in *Violence and the Sacred* is ignored. Heyns declines to engage with his theoretical model in ways that might assist his reading of tales of sacrifice; in the following chapters, I will read texts in light of the entire Girardian theoretical arc, from mimetic desire, through ritual and myth, to the production of narratives. In doing so, I will take Heyns's notion of 'reciprocity of meaning' to its fuller potential as a Girardian approach to reading literature.

I have already considered more broadly the ways in which the novel genre might lend itself to performances of, and stories about, the scapegoat mechanism, which inhabit and explore the tensions between the sacrificial and Scriptural narrative traditions. Cousineau's key idea about the modern novel's self-consciousness, and Heyns's notion of 'reciprocity of meaning', give me a more particular paradigm for reading my chosen novels. However, where Cousineau and Heyns look for evidence in the plot regarding the guilt or innocence of the scapegoat, and the guilt or innocence of the narrators and onlookers, I intend to look for evidence that is both broader and richer: evidence of tragedy. By this I mean those thematic features of ritual and myth identified by Girard, such as undifferentiation, contagion, decay, and monstrosity, which are continued in tragedy, and the treatment of which is significant in terms of cathartic effect. I will argue that each novel is to some extent self-conscious about these tropes, making not only the scapegoating-sacrifice but the whole corpus of myth and ritual the subject *of* the text rather than a structural element within it.

Somewhat surprisingly, *none* of the above scholars of modern fiction utilise the notion of tragedy in their analyses, despite the fact that each of their works is an explicit application of

Girardian theory.[15] The rich possibilities opened up by Girard, regarding tragedies as scapegoat rituals in narrative form and gesturing towards the notion of modern narratives as anti-myths, have not been taken up by any significant analysis of modern novels *as tragedies*. In this thesis I aim to address this oversight, and focus my attention on the ways in which each novel treats the thematic features of tragedy as part of 'reciprocity of meaning', participating in the narrative tradition that Girard sees beginning in myth and inverted in Judeo-Christian Scripture. In the coming chapters I will read my selected modern American novels as tragedies and consider the extent to which they repeat the patterns of scapegoat-myths, and the ways in which they resist and refuse the mythical-tragic. Such ways include not only narratorial but textual ambivalence, as the novels weight themselves with mythical elements and yet fail to complete the catharsis, split between the sacrificial and the Scriptural. Further, I will consider a category of scapegoats that has received little Girardian literary analysis: women.

Women in Girardian Theory and in Modern Tragedy

In two of my three chosen novels, those who suffer and die are women. Girard's 'lack of gender consciousness… throughout [the] articulation and explication of his theory' (Nowak 24) has attracted criticism throughout the decades of his works' publication, most notably in a scathing piece by Toril Moi in 1982. Moi sees in Girard's theory a blindness to, or even denial of, feminine desire, and a determination to cast women as objects rather than subjects in the mimetic triangle. Moi argues that 'that the reason for this absence [of feminine desire] is… Girard' s exclusion of the mother from the Oedipal triangle' (Moi 21), and goes on to quote at length Girard's descriptions of primitive and classical practices in which women are

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[15] One scholar, Wm. Blake Tyrrell, has turned a Girardian lens on the texts of ancient Greece (*The Sacrifice of Socrates*), but his study is limited to a focus on Plato's textual representations of Socrates, without connecting this discussion to the presence and function of the tragic genre, then or now.

marginalised as proof that 'his mimetic desire must essentially be taken to mean masculine desire' (25). Moi's reference to the exclusion of women in many of Girard's anthropological examples is pertinent: why are women so often depicted as playing little part in the mechanism that Girard claims is fundamental to human—not merely masculine—identity and society?

Girard has answered this himself on a number of occasions, arguing that since historically 'in many cultures women [were] not considered full-fledged members of their society', (*VS* 13) they were excluded both from the public rivalry that led to mimetic crisis, and from its violent and eventually ritual resolutions:

> The violence precipitated by a mimetic crisis… was essentially a masculine phenomenon. [Women] were on the outside, or as marginal as could be and still belong to the social structure. They played no role in the games of violence and the sacred… Their marginality was inseparable from their nonparticipation in male violence. (Girard, *TGR* 274)

For Girard, since women were often excluded from 'the male power of archaic societies' (Girard, *TGR* 274), they were also excluded from the mechanisms that kept both power and society operative. He points out that such exclusion may even take the form of blaming the women for the crisis, as in the *Bacchae* of Euripides, in which there is 'a slander of women as the perpetrators of the paroxysmic violence' (274). The women must be innocent of the crisis since they are excluded from participating in the formal status-rivalry which catalyses the crisis.

But to remark upon the historical marginality of women is not, *pace* Moi, to exclude or deny feminine desire. In fact, as others have also argued, a feature of Girard's theory is that it avoids gender essentialism, in the sense of 'attaching mimesis to genetic heritage, anything biologically preordained, or a universal family structure or situation' (Girard, *TGR* 225). All humans are

equally desiring subjects. Indeed, this function of the mimetic theory to operate outside traditional gender stereotypes was productively utilised by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* in which she furthered the application of Girardian theory to account for manifold forms of desire between men outside the proscriptions of heterosexual desire. Nevertheless it is true that while Girard's formulation of desire does not exclude women as desiring subjects it is not particularly interested in them either, leading some scholars to characterise Girard's 'paradigm of triangulation as a mode of literary analysis' as 'a heterosexual motif… later transformed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick into a homosocial/homosexual triad' (Berenstein 19), leaving still others to follow this trend and 'recast' the Girardian triangle with female social and lesbian desire (see Castle; H. Jordan Landry; Dee). Such extensions are necessary and productive, albeit limited in their application of Girardian desire to sexual orientation, which is a reduction of Girard's schema: unlike Freud, for Girard sexual desire is primary neither to identity nor to the existence of further desires, but rather sexual desire is simply one mediated desire among many.

However, this thesis's interest in women is not primarily as desiring subjects, but as scapegoats. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard described women's eligibility as scapegoats in archaic societies as problematic: women are marginal, but not generally marginal *enough* (*VS* 13). As the wives of husbands, and daughters of fathers, they are at the least valuable property, and valuable as parts of the family structure. They are unlikely to be 'sacrificable' without retaliation, the essential characteristic of the scapegoat, unless they also belong to another taboo class, such as the foreign or the physically deformed. However, in his later statements Girard reconsidered this stance, and he listed women as 'hidden victims of society', whose oppression is only 'being brought to light' in our own era (Girard, *TGR* 207)—the very exclusion of women from 'male

power' that kept them on the sidelines of mimetic crisis reconceived as a continual sacrifice of women and their bodies, away from the spectacular violence of the ritual stage.[16]

Secondary Girardian scholarship has taken up this notion and used Girardian theory to read the historical victimisation of women. In the words of feminist Girardian Susan Nowak, 'Girardian understanding of religion, societal formation, and modes of relationality informs the relation of violence and victimage to women' (Nowak 19). She argues that Girard's lack of attention to gender issues when analysing myth, ritual, and religion is important because these things are often used to reinforce oppressive gender-based social orders (see also Rakoczy 30). Girard is vocal about the significance of concealment and denial in the scapegoating process: what is needed is a critical reading of the concealment of gender in processes of 'violence and victimization, social cohesion and scapegoating, and religious ritualization and community formation' (Nowak 24).

Probably the most significant contributor to that project is Martha Reineke, whose *Sacrificed Lives* and *Intimate Domain* explore the ways in which women and their bodies have been victims in historical circumstance and record. Pairing Julia Kristeva's ideas on gender, language and sacrifice with Girard's analysis of religion and violence, her work attempts to make visible the victimisation of women by sacrificial social structures. Girard's hermeneutic of suspicion enables Reineke to read history and myth for women's suppressed experiences, finding (in Girardian terms) 'texts of persecution' in which the persecutor controls a text that blames the victim and conceals the truth of violence. In *Sacrificed Lives*, Reineke's focus is on the experiences of women in the real, physical world, invoking sacrifice as 'a powerfully instructive

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[16] Part of this 'bringing to light' is in fact being done by modern tragedies, as Eagleton notes regarding tragic women like Blanche DuBois: 'tragedy is typically less heroic crisis than inveterate condition, a blighted existence rather than a bungled action' (Eagleton 11).

metaphor for analyses of women's lives' (*Sacrificed Lives* 5), and taking as case studies the sufferings of medieval mystics, the Puritan witchhunts, and the Catholic Church's valorisation of motherhood. She uses Girard's concept of substitutionary violence to open up Kristeva's notion of the centrality of sexual difference in the sacrificial economy of human culture and community—the ways in which violence against women is deployed to re-establish sexual difference as a means of resisting chaos and maintaining differentiated order. While *Sacrificed Lives* addresses myth, especially as myth informs conceptualisation of real women under the categories of 'mystic, witch, and mother', it does not address tragedy in either its classical or modern forms. In *Intimate Domain* her study shifts to fictional texts, including Sophocles' *Antigone*, but with a focus on underpinning Girard's ideas with Kristevan theory to read Antigone's body as demonstrating a 'corporeal ethics' (*Intimate Domain* 175). By physically empathising with Antigone, Reineke argues, we may 'stand with her' and experience 'how a sacrificial economy can be broken open… If we take tragedy to heart, we may participate in its labor and build an expressive space in which to embrace an otherness' that brings us to a 'healing truth' (175).

Reineke's attention to the prevalence of women as scapegoats in the era of Western Christianity, and her idea of 'taking tragedy to heart', opens up a space for analysis of women in modern tragedy: do these tragedies continue the victimisation of women by textual and imaginative means, or do they contribute to the resistance of such violence? Reineke suggests that Kristeva's practice of turning towards 'uncanny strangeness' may allow us to 'build expressive spaces in which to embrace an otherness … open, undecidable spoken spaces' (Reineke, *Intimate Domain* 197) that make non-violence, non-victimisation, possible. Perhaps modern tragedies with women at their core may contribute to the construction of such 'expressive spaces'—in Girardian terms, spaces in which the monstrosity of the feminine Other is brought into doubt, the chaos within oneself cautiously admitted. *Sacrificed Lives* concludes

with a hopeful gesture towards the possibility of such spaces; this point is where my project begins.

That 'uncanny strangeness' has been noted by Elisabeth Bronfen as characteristic of the depiction of women's bodies in literature, in which woman are 'the Other', functioning as 'the site of *Unheimlichkeit*', embodying cultural anxieties about loss of stable distinctions (Bronfen 182).

> As the outsider per se, woman can also come to stand for a complete negation of the ruling norm, for the element which disrupts the bonds of normal conventions and the passage through which that threat to the norm is articulated… Over her dead body, cultural norms are reconfirmed or secured… [Her death] re-establishes an order that was momentarily suspended due to her presence. (Bronfen 181)

I will read *The Virgin Suicides* and *Revolutionary Road* as examples of tragedies in which the death of a woman or women 'emerges as the requirement for a preservation of existing cultural norms and values' (Bronfen 181), but which also problematise that 'requirement' by their very deployment of tragic tropes and their self-conscious depiction of women as mythical figures. It bears remembering here that tragedy as a form, whilst often depicting women as eligible sacrifices, has also historically made space for women to be visible. As Foley and Howard note, whilst Greek tragedy was created and performed by men for a primarily male audience, in a culture that marginalised women, classical tragedy makes women surprisingly prominent. Greek tragedy 'is peopled by many vocal and even active women characters: virgin daughters, wives, mothers of all ages, priestesses, Greek and barbarian women, even slaves' (Foley and Howard 627). These women speak passionately and persuasively both to other characters and the audience, they dominate onstage domestic spaces and move outside them to the public sphere. They have agency, taking often subversive action despite their male guardians, and may even—

like Medea—control the plot. In the 5th century, female choruses became popular, substantially engaging with female protagonists. In comparison with earlier Greek poetry, 'tragic women are far more visible and assertive' (627).

This trend continues in early modern theatre. As Foley and Howard point out, despite the fact that women were not allowed to perform on public stages until after the Reformation, female characters were often substantial and memorable, sharing 'top billing' in titles (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*) or even being primary protagonists (Webster's *Duchess of Maland*, Elizabeth Cary's *Tragedy of Miriam)* (Foley and Howard 627). Of course, women characters were often caricatures at either end of 'the predictable villain-victim spectrum', the evil of King Lear's daughters and Lady Macbeth set against the pathetic vulnerability of Cordelia, Ophelia, and Desdemona (627). Such characterisations are illustrative of the truism that the mere representation of women on the stage does not necessitate a feminist gender politics. However, in Girardian terms, and for my purposes, the positioning of tragic women at extremes is significant to their role as scapegoats. Lady Macbeth, guilty of a heinous crime against the social order, thence condemned to deteriorate and die, is a classic cathartic scapegoat; Cordelia, saintly and suffering an undeserved fate, is a Christ figure. In both cases, scapegoat-women are central to the tragedy. *The Virgin Suicides* and *Revolutionary Road* also place women at their centre, but in more complicated, less caricatured ways. I will argue that this represents a more nuanced tragic depiction of women, who do not need to be saints in order to be scapegoats.

Tragedy and the American Dream

Tragedy is contextual. Particular works of tragedy should be read not only as instances of a long tradition but, in Hugh Grady's words, as 'aesthetic incarnations of their moments of history'

(Grady 797). Rebecca Bushnell, introducing her excellent *Companion to Tragedy*, states that an important premise for studies of tragedy is that 'in Western culture the meaning of tragedy is inseparable from history'. Since Ancient tragedy was rooted in the religion, politics and culture of the Greek city-state, it has always been a 'social art', and its endurance through the centuries has been 'intertwined with the fate of dynasties, revolutions, and crises of social change' (Bushnell 2). In the same volume, Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood stresses that Greek tragedies are not timeless, and attempts to read them ahistorically are at best naïve and at worst wilful misunderstandings, ignoring the fact that Greek tragedies are historical and cultural artefacts rooted in the circumstances of their production. Those plays were 'produced and understood through the deployment of perceptual filters shaped by the cultural assumptions of fifth century Athens', and should be read with an understanding of that culture (Sourvinou-Inwood, "Greek Tragedy and Ritual" 7).

In the same way, I intend to read my chosen novels as products of their time and place—mid- and late-twentieth century America. I am particularly interested in the notion of the American Dream, both its long history and its importance to Americans in the twentieth century. The American Dream seems to me an inherently tragic notion, rooted in fantasies of heroes overcoming obstacles, sudden elevations and falls from grace, daring *hamartia* and defiance of the gods. Such superficial resemblances, for me, are clues that the Dream is in fact an imagined narrative participating in the tragic tradition—that is, in Girardian terms, a template for a culture of mimesis and sacrifice.

To begin with, the Dream is inherently acquisitive, and thus relevant to a Girardian reading: it is fuelled by wanting what other people have, and even more pertinently, wanting to *become* others, to take their place higher on the ladder of success—in other words, by mimetic desire. According to Girardian theory, mimetic desire is increasingly stimulated, and gathers

momentum towards crisis, under circumstances of internal mediation. As I have already outlined, Girard argues that since modern democratic societies have tended to remove social boundaries, they are plagued by widespread internal mediation; under such circumstances desire rapidly becomes collective, unanimous, and infinitely repetitive. As I will illustrate in examples from my chosen novels, as well as from ostensibly non-fictional representations of American history and culture, the American Dream is premised on precisely this kind of democratic fluidity. In *Deceit, Desire, and The Novel*, Girard briefly but pertinently remarks on de Tocqueville's description of modern America as an example of this phenomenon. He quotes de Tocqueville at length as a perfect illumination of the modern social transition from external to internal mediation. De Tocqueville describes the United States as having eliminated the traditional stratifications of class and wealth, which initially gives its citizens lofty dreams of success, following a smooth, golden road to the pinnacle of society, free of the checkpoints and tollbooths of the aristocratic system. However, the removal of those barriers multiplies the number of potential rivals and thus frustrates them all equally, presenting new obstacles equally difficult to overcome: 'they have destroyed the annoying privileges of some of their fellow men; they encounter the competition of everyone. The boundary has changed its shape rather than its position' (qtd in Girard, *DDN* 120).

De Tocqueville's words seem so pertinent a description of mimetic desire and internal mediation that the above paragraph could easily be Girard himself speaking, as could de Tocqueville's longer description of the U.S. citizens' frustration with their inability to reach the top:

> When all the privileges of birth and fortune have been destroyed so that all professions are open to everyone and it is possible to climb to the top by oneself, an immense and easy career seems available to men's ambitions and they gladly imagine a

> great destiny for themselves. But they are mistaken, as daily experience proves to them. The very quality which enables each citizen to sustain great hopes makes all citizens equally weak. It limits their strength on all sides at the same time as it allows their desires to spread. (qtd in Girard, *DDN* 120)

De Tocqueville was observing and writing about nineteenth century America. By the twentieth century, these American ideals of a great destiny for every individual had become so core to the American identity that they were enshrined in a phrase that would resonate through the subsequent decades: *the American Dream*. The American historian James Truslow Adams brought the phrase 'American Dream' into popular use with his 1931 book *The Epic of America*, in which he described the Dream as 'a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature... unhampered [by] barriers... unrepressed by social orders' (Adams 415–416).

Adams actually bemoans the American obsession with attaining material wealth. He deplores the 'moral muddle' into which present American society has sunk 'by raising money making to the rank of a patriotic and moral virtue' (Adams 225). Adams casts this lust for wealth as a kind of scapegoat: an intrusive polluter, 'the cancer that ate deep into the vitals of our life' and a source of chaos and disorder in which 'money [is] set off against order' and law (398). But Adams does not want to do away with the dream of unhindered ascension. He simply wants Americans to admire different models and by extension to desire different things: to aspire to 'aesthetic and intellectual' supremacy, urging those 'who are below in the scale… to strive to rise, not merely economically, but culturally' (404). Adams's American Dream is a dream of attaining the 'fullest stature' not only as measured by possessions but by all the trappings previously exclusive to the aristocracy: education, aesthetic taste, cultural literacy.

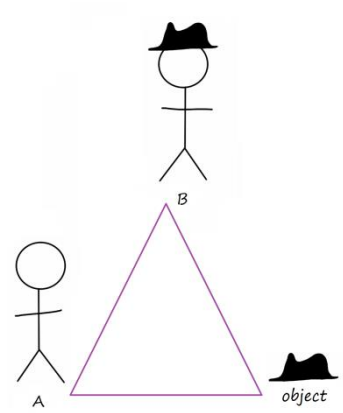
Leo Lemay finds the same notions of the Dream in the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin, another text highly influential in the development of Americans' ideas about themselves (Lemay 26). Firstly, there is the ideal of the United States as 'nonfeudal, nonaristocratic, and nonreligious', an 'ideal democratic world' (26) completely free of the barriers present in those societies stratified by class or religious creed. Additionally, the *Autobiography* not only extols and reinforces the 'unrepressed' conditions of the American Dream, but Lemay quotes Franklin offering himself as a model of the American man *par excellence*: having risen from 'Poverty and Obscurity... to a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation', the reader may find the author 'fit to be imitated' (qtd in 27).

The Dream may be non-feudal in the classic sense but it is hierarchical in a new way. Ascendancy is key to the Dream: the unhindered opportunity to rise to the top. In a system where people are equal but success is stratified, desire is always mediated: every climber wishes to be the man who is slightly further up the ladder and believes he has the right to that position. Seen in the light of Girardian theory, the American Dream of 'keeping up with the Joneses' is inherently self-defeating: a catalyst for catastrophe. I will therefore argue that the Dream creates a culture in which mimetic crisis is inevitable, and thus that crisis and catharsis (whether by scapegoat-sacrifice, vicarious tragic substitution, or compassionate revelation) will naturally appear in its texts about itself.

1.2. Girardian Theory

In order to demonstrate how tragedy fits into Girard's model, I must begin at the beginning of his theory, well before tragedy makes an appearance. However, as will be seen, every element of Girard's theory eventually comes to bear upon his conception of tragedy, as tragic texts encapsulate or demonstrate the entire Girardian theoretical narrative.

The cornerstone of Girard's theory is the idea of 'mimetic desire', outlined in his first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. For Girard, mimesis (*Gk.* μίμησις ≈ imitation) is the basis of desire. In contrast to theories of desire that state that our desires originate within us, and are a bipartite relationship between the subject and the object, Girard says that our desires are not spontaneous, but imitative.



One way to represent this is with a triangular diagram. We call A the 'subject'. B is what Girard calls A's 'model' or 'mediator'. A admires B. He wants to be like B. He observes B, and *he learns what to desire* from B. If B desires it, it becomes desirable in A's eyes. A thinks that his desire for the object is a straight line between them. But in fact, he gets to the object via B. Sometimes Girard calls this 'triangular desire' instead of 'mimetic desire' (*DDN* 18).

In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard argues that 'great novelists' understand that desire is mimetic. Bad novels, he says, repeat the 'lie of spontaneous desire', that our desires are innate, but truly great novels reveal the truth (Girard, *DDN* 11). He starts with the example of Don Quixote.

> "I want you to know, Sancho, that the famous Amadis of Gaul was one of the most perfect knight errants. But what am I saying, one of the most perfect? I should say the

> only, the first, the unique, the master and lord… Amadis was the post, the star, the sun for brave and amorous knights, and we others who fight under the banner of love and chivalry should imitate him. Thus, my friend Sancho, I reckon that whoever imitates him best will come closest to perfect chivalry." (Qtd in Girard, *DDN* 1)

Girard argues that Cervantes is depicting desire as mimetic: Don Quixote is not choosing what to desire as an 'individual prerogative', but rather desires objects in imitation of Amadis. The psychology of Quixote is what Girard terms 'desire according to the Other', as opposed to the romantic ideal of desire according to Oneself (*DDN* 18).

Girard further explores the nature of mimetic desire in his examination of two further novels, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Stendhal's *The Red & the Black*. He denotes Stendhal's *vanité* as a term for mimetic desire—the vain pursuit of imitation in order to more closely resemble the model—seen in a plethora of Stendhalian characters from Mathilde de la Mole to the Bishop of Agde. Flaubert's Emma Bovary, likewise, has had her imagination shaped by stories of romantic heroines and has no apparent sense of self apart from her romantic ideals.

Girard quotes de Gaultier's description of 'Bovaryism' as the need of the protagonists to 'see themselves as they are not'. The object, according to Girard, is not what is really desired: 'the object is only a means of reaching the mediator. The desire is aimed at [acquiring] the mediator's *being*' (Girard, *DDN* 53). The subject senses an ontological emptiness in himself, a lack of identity, a sense of being the only one excluded from the fraternity of humankind. Mimetic desire is a response to a feeling of 'an essential lack... that being *nothing* by themselves, they [may] become *something* [by imitation]' (de Gaultier qtd in 53 emphasis original). The subject 'expects his being to be radically changed by the act of possession' (53). This aspect of Girard's theory means that object scarcity (real or perceived) is not necessary to stimulate mimetic desire because to possess the object does not satisfy the ontological lack:

> The subject discovers that possession of the object has not changed his being... the moment the hero takes hold of the desired object its 'virtue' disappears like gas from a burst balloon...
>
> He cannot deny the failure... but he can confine its results to the object which he now possesses and possibly to the mediator who directed him to it... the power [to transform him] he confers elsewhere, on a second object, [a second model], a new desire. The hero goes through his existence, from desire to desire, as one crosses a stream, jumping from one slippery stone to another. (Girard, *DDN* 88, 89)

The frustration occasioned by this continual failure certainly troubles the Girardian subject, but generally Girard describes this process as unconscious or at least unreflective: the subject has no insight into the deceptive nature of mimetic desire, and so expectantly, and optimistically, places his hope on the next object or mediator as eminently likely to deliver satisfaction. The aspect of mimetic desire that *does* cause genuine distress to the Girardian subject is the notion Girard describes next: mimetic rivalry.

In Stendhal's *The Red and the Black,* M. de Rênal and Valenod are the two richest and most influential men in town, and M. de Rênal desires to hire Julien as a tutor because he believes that Valenod desires Julien for himself. In this situation, the subject and the model occupy the same social space, a circumstance essentially different from that of Don Quixote or Madame Bovary (Girard, *DDN* 6). Don Quixote's model, Amadis, is a fictional character. There can be no contact between them, and Quixote will never perceive Amadis as an impediment to his goal of being a chivalrous knight. Emma Bovary has one tantalising glimpse of her models in the flesh—the aristocratic young ladies at the ball at Vaubyessards—but she will never see them again, and never travel to Paris to vie with them for romantic attentions. By contrast, M. de

Rênal sees Valenod as a rival for prestige and possessions. Valenod teaches M. de Rênal what to desire, but also appears as a potential hurdle in acquiring the object of desire:

> The mediator can no longer act his role of model without also acting or appearing to act the role of obstacle. Like the relentless sentry of the Kafka fable, the model shows his disciple the gate of paradise and forbids him to enter with one and the same gesture. (Girard, *DDN* 7)

When Valenod sees the desires of M. de Rênal, this stimulates his own desire in turn. The mimetic nature of desire means that when the mediator sees the subject desiring the object, the mediator will desire the object even more. The positions of subject and model become irrelevant—the triangle is turned sideways, infinitely and reciprocally orienting the desirers toward the object via each other. They're equally copying each other, provoking more and more imitative desire, and also increasingly seeing the Other as a hated rival, who seeks to keep the desired object for himself, and prevent others from acquiring it.

The distance between subject and model Girard renders as the 'height of the triangle'. When this distance is sufficient to prevent contact between 'the two spheres of possibilities, of which the mediator and the subject occupy the respective centres', Girard terms this 'external mediation' (Girard, *DDN* 8). The model is external to the subject's world and there can be no rivalry. 'Internal mediation' occurs when the distance between A and B is such that their respective 'spheres' touch, or 'penetrate each other' sufficiently for them to perceive one another as rivals (8).

Crucially, this distance does not have to be geographic or temporal. While the distance between Yonville and Paris is considerable, it is social or 'spiritual' distance that truly separates the spheres of external mediation (Girard, *DDN* 7). While Don Quixote is physically distant from

Amadis, Sancho Panza takes his master as his model, and yet not his rival. He desires a version of chivalric life appropriate to his station, rather than an exact replica of the prestigious status of his master:

> Don Quixote and Sancho are always close to each other physically but the social and intellectual distance which separates them remains insuperable. The valet never desires [exactly] what his master desires. Sancho covets the food left by the monks, the purse of gold found on the road, and other objects which Don Quixote willingly lets him have… The harmony between the two companions is never seriously troubled. (Girard, *DDN* 8)

External mediation, according to Girard, admits some conscious awareness of admiration of the model: the subject 'worships his model openly and declares himself his disciple'. Don Quixote is passionately lyrical on the subject of Amadis, his hero; by contrast, the subject of internal mediation 'far from boasting of his efforts to imitate, carefully hides them' (Girard, *DDN* 7). Since 'the impulse toward the object is ultimately an impulse toward the mediator', the subject resents the mediator for being what the subject herself seeks to become—resentment that is provoked by the paradox that the more hostile and haughty the mediator, the greater her prestige in the eyes of the subject. Girard explores the notions of resentment and envy in detail, noting that envy goes beyond covetousness into hatred of the possessor: 'the envious person's imagination [transforms] into concerted opposition the passive obstacle which the possessor puts in his way by the mere fact of possession' (10).

These phenomena of envy and resentment are most evident in cases of close internal mediation, such as the petty social rivalry of M. de Rênal and Valenod. Girard quotes Stendhal's *Memoirs of a Tourist*, in which the novelist noted that 'modern emotions' are the 'fruits of universal vanity: envy, jealousy and impotent hatred'. Girard follows Stendhal and Max Scheler

to suggest that the nineteenth century was pervaded by this 'romantic state of mind' because of its preceding and ongoing social upheavals: an increase in social mobility and decline of old systems of rigidly stratified social structure, leading to a greatly increased incidence of internal mediation. In a modern democratic society, mimetic desire is no more than 'the passionate imitation of individuals who are fundamentally our equals and whom we endow with an arbitrary prestige' (*DDN* 10).

Girard argues that ancient societies were constructed in order to minimise rivalry by formalising each individual's place in a highly stratified and immovable social structure. By contrast, modern societies have tended to remove social boundaries and attempt to place large masses of citizens in the same social space (Girard, *VS* 56). However, admiration, imitation and envy are not reduced by this reduction in formal status. Once official distinctions of nobility are done away with, Girard argues, the upper-class gain their prestige through the aspirations of the bourgeoisie to join them. The desire of the middle-class for wealth and privilege 'stimulates' the desire of the upper-class: 'mediated by each other, henceforth the two classes will desire the same things in the same way' (Girard, *DDN* 122). This reciprocal process means the two will increasingly resemble one another, 'double mediation is a melting pot in which differences among classes and individuals gradually dissolve' (119). The modern individual is surrounded by potential mediators and potential imitators:

> The revolutionaries thought they would be destroying vanity when they destroyed [the nobility]. But vanity is like a virulent cancer that spreads... Who is there left to imitate?...Henceforth men shall copy each other; idolatry of one person is replaced by hatred of a hundred thousand rivals. (Girard, *DDN* 119)

The push-and-shove of mimetic rivalry escalates to what Girard calls *mimetic crisis*: a point at which communal bonds are precarious or forgotten, and social stability has broken down.

The mimetic nature of desire will eventually cause violence, or rather, 'violence is the process itself' (Girard, "Mimesis" 9) when people try to prevent each other from getting the object they all desire—which can be a material possession but includes metaphysical objects like success (see discussion in Kirwan 15). The mimetic 'feedback process' creates a violent loop as the subject and model are 'mimetically affected' by one another's desire, and they seek to remove the Other as Obstacle 'more and more forcefully' (Girard, "Mimesis" 12). This is Girard's theory of the origin of violence: 'Violence is not originary; it is a by-product of mimetic rivalry' (12).

The mimetic antagonists are 'caught in an escalation of frustration' (Girard, "Mimesis" 12). This has consequences not only for ally-relationships and social bonds, the building-blocks of a functional community, but for the basic structures of meaning itself. According to Girard, violent conflict is mimetic and reciprocal, and so the antagonists increasingly resemble one another. This loss of difference is a serious threat to meaning, since meanings and definitions are generally understood in terms of oppositional notions, contrast and sequence:

> 'Degree', or gradus, is the underlying principle of all order, natural and cultural. [Difference] permits individuals to find a place for themselves in society; it lends a meaning to things, arranging them in proper sequence within a hierarchy; it defines the objects and moral standards that men alter, manipulate, and transform. (Girard, *VS* 56)

Therefore, not only social order and peace, but the deeply productive structures of meaning, leading in turn to 'fecundity' (Girard, *VS* 56), depend upon differentiated distinctions. It should be noted here that Girard is not *endorsing* formal structures of difference, especially social

hierarchies, as an ideal state for humankind. Rather, he is describing things as he believes they have been for many human societies, and seeking to understand the nature of the crisis that those societies sought to avoid.

At this point Girard turns to Shakespeare for an illustration of 'mimetic crisis'—the state in which degree, or difference, is lost or unstable, and chaos results. It is worth quoting in full, as Girard does, Ulysses' speech from *Troilus and Cressida:*

> ... O when Degree is shaked
> Which is the ladder to all high designs,
> The enterprise is sick! How could communities,
> Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
> Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
> The primogenitive and due of birth,
> Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
> But by degree, stand in authentic place?
> Take but degree away, untune that string,
> And, hark, what discord follows! Each thing meets
> In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters
> Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,
> And make a sop of all this solid globe:
> Strength should be lord of imbecility,
> And the rude son should strike his father dead:
> Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong
> Between whose endless jar justice resides,

> Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
>
> (qtd in Girard, *VS* 56)

In this crisis, all differences are unstable and natural orders subverted: the border between sea and land is blurred, sons may murder fathers, the distinction between right and wrong is lost, and even language itself—the 'names' of right and wrong—becomes meaningless. Girard notes that 'mere oppugnancy' is a good description of mimetic rivalry, in which the opponents lose their identities and are 'reduced to indefinite objects' (Girard, *VS* 57) in reciprocal conflict, shorn of their distinguishing characteristics. Thus mimetic crisis is a state of violent conflict between human individuals, but also a state in which meaning itself seems precariously unstable:

> In this situation no one and nothing is spared; coherent thinking collapses and rational activities are abandoned. All associative forms are dissolved or become antagonistic; all values, spiritual or material, perish. (Girard, *VS* 57)

In the undifferentiated state of mimetic crisis, the Girardian subjects are in dire need of some means of restoring order and resolving conflict. This means is the next point in the Girardian narrative, and the crux of his theory.

In Girard's view, at the climax of a mimetic crisis, the affected community can't stop the inevitable violence. Their only option is to alter its trajectory: they must move from the endless push-and-shove, and escalation, of mimetic rivalry, to a collective act against an outside party who won't or can't retaliate, thus breaking the cycle. The victim is actually blamed for the crisis and expelled from the community. This process Girard sees beginning in 'primitive' human

societies, and terms it the 'scapegoat-mechanism'.[17] He introduced this notion in *Violence and the Sacred*, and expanded upon this particular aspect of his theory in his next major work, *The Scapegoat*.

The scapegoat-mechanism works because it is the only violence that ends violence. All the previous violence, directed by members of the community against one another, begat further violence in the form of retaliation. Simply calling a halt to this retaliatory violence is impossible, as each aggrieved victim returns blow for blow, and if the conflict leads to death the fight is taken up by his/her surviving relatives or allies. Thus violence cannot be arbitrarily halted, but 'it can be diverted to another object' (Girard, *VS* 4). The scapegoat is a different kind of victim, one who is marginal in the community and has no allies to seek vengeance for his/her death. Violence directed towards the scapegoat is therefore, at last, efficacious, deflecting upon an expendable victim the violence that would otherwise continue to rebound throughout the community.

The person who becomes the eventual scapegoat is both 'vulnerable and close at hand' (Girard, *VS* 3)—in other words, part of the community whilst also not a part, unintegrated, marginal. Girard cites examples such as prisoners of war, slaves, small children (prior to rites of initiation or naming, having no formal place in society), unmarried adolescents, the disabled, and foreigners, as belonging to this category.[18] The essential characteristic of an eligible scapegoat is the fact that between such victims and their community a 'crucial social link is missing', which means that they can be the targets of violence without provoking reprisals—their expulsion or

[17] The term 'scapegoat mechanism' is not original to Girard; Kenneth Burke used it in first in *Permanence and Change*, but Girard borrowed the term and gave it a fuller expression in his theory.

[18] Girard takes this list from anthropological examples of victims of ritualised human sacrifice. Human sacrifice forms a new category of scapegoat-mechanism, which Girard contends evolved from spontaneous scapegoating, and which I will treat further in this chapter. For my current purposes the list of victims is illustrative of those who have marginal status and are vulnerable to selection as scapegoats.

death does not automatically result in vengeance (14). Instead, the 'communal force' of uncontrolled hostility can be safely and 'unanimously directed against a single individual' (89), whose death or expulsion stops the escalation of violence and delivers peace.

Girard claims that, in these early acts of spontaneous violence, the scapegoat was not consciously chosen in order to serve this purpose. Rather, the scapegoating happens spontaneously, and due to mimetic forces, as one, then some, then all antagonists turn upon the scapegoat in a snowball effect that is mimetically attractive:

> The slightest hint, the most groundless accusation, can circulate with vertiginous speed and is transformed into irrefutable proof. The corporate sense of conviction snowballs, each member taking confidence from his neighbour by a rapid process of mimesis. The firm conviction of the group is based on no other evidence than the unshakable unanimity of its own illogic.
> (Girard, *VS* 89) (See also Girard, *TH* 26; *VS* 151)

The scapegoat's expulsion as an 'outsider' redefines and recoheres the 'insiders' of the community: in the act of scapegoating, rivals are transformed into allies, turning their violence upon the victim. The unanimous act of violence creates what scholar Chris Fleming has described as an 'intense human solidarity' (Fleming 48), which draws together all the former antagonists into a unified group. As Girard summarises:

> Whereas mimetic appropriation is inevitably divisive, causing the contestants to fight over an object they cannot all appropriate together, mimetic antagonism is ultimately unitive, or rather reunitive since... they can all rush against that victim... (Girard, "Mimesis" 13)

In this process, the scapegoat is characterised as the *cause* of the crisis—the truly deserving object of violence, against whom violence was finally efficacious. Since 'violence subsides' after the act of scapegoating, it is said to have been incarnate in the victim and to have departed the community along with him, leaving the remaining reunited mob 'free of infection' (Girard, *VS* 303). In fact, the scapegoat is not the cause of the crisis, but rather the only accused antagonist to whom a charge of guilt will stick. The 'groundless accusations' that began the turn towards the scapegoat stick because of the scapegoat's isolated vulnerability: since no-one defends the scapegoat, or protests at the fairness of his persecution, it is easy to categorise him as guilty (88). Fleming notes that the more the community can believe in the guilt of the scapegoat, the more effective the unifying power of the scapegoat-mechanism: 'the moral certitude of the accusation itself standing in almost exact proportion to the extent of the *esprit de corps* that it is able to produce' (Fleming 48).

Girard defines *catharsis* as the relief and reunification experienced by a community through the scapegoat-mechanism (Girard, *VS* 303). In *Violence and the Sacred*, he examines many anthropological examples of collective violence, and reads these as the scapegoat-mechanism becoming ritualised and carried out as a formal rite in order to deliver this cathartic benefit regularly to the community. In this mode, the scapegoat-mechanism serves as prevention rather than a cure, purging the community of the tensions amassed by mimetic rivalry.

For Girard, ritual human sacrifice arises out of the scapegoat-mechanism. It is 'catharsis performed in a structural setting' that strongly resembles the narrative of spontaneous unanimous victimisation (Girard, *VS* 112, 114). These rituals, he says, are the basis of early religions. The scapegoat-mechanism becomes a ritual of 'religious purification' that aims to cleanse the community of impurities and restore peace and order (303).

The scapegoat may be initially seen as a poisonous intruder, but her death also saves and restores the community from its own violence. Since the community associates the escape from chaos and return to order with the death of the scapegoat, she acquires an aura not only of malevolence beyond her deserts but also an association with beneficence and blessing. The scapegoat thus acquires a numinosity that, Girard argues, constitutes the category of the sacred, in which the scapegoat assumes the place of a god:

> The experience of a supremely evil and then beneficent being, whose appearance and disappearance are punctuated by collective murder, cannot fail to be literally gripping… The community that was once so terribly stricken suddenly finds itself free of antagonism, completely delivered. (Girard, *TH* 28, 36)

The members of community, according to Girard, have no insight into the true nature of the rivalrous crisis, its cause in their own rivalry and hatred, which is dissolved in the action against the scapegoat. They think of the scapegoat as having the power to be supernaturally poisonous, causing the crisis, and also supernaturally beneficent, curing the crisis. This may seem incredible, Girard concedes, but he defends this 'double transference' as the only possible result of scapegoat-violence. The persecutors 'cannot take credit' for the resolution of the crisis, their reconciliation with one another. They 'see themselves as completely passive… purely reactive' (Girard, *SG* 43), and even when the crisis is more than social, the only possible explanation for its resolution is the power of the scapegoat. While scapegoat-expulsions cannot cure epidemics or halt floods, Girard argues that 'the main dimension of every crisis is the way in which it affects human relations' (43)—the crisis in the physical environmental threatens the stability of the social environment. While the flood lasts, scapegoats may be sacrificed in vain, but the eventual sacrifice that coincides with the receding waters will also coincide with an end to the 'personal repercussions' of the flood, and the victim's death will be believed to have affected all

these phenomena (43). The scapegoat-figure, once ritualised, is thus at once the most despicable delinquent and the means of salvation for the community.

Girard examines in detail a number of religious rituals that seem to follow this pattern, such as the crowning of a king in a Central African tribe whose royalty belongs to the category which anthropological observers have dubbed 'Sacred Monarchies', in which the king is invested with honour but after a certain period is ritually killed. The investiture hymn, in Girard's words, 'expresses with classic concision a dynamic formula for salvation that [the] hypothesis of the surrogate victim can render intelligible':

> You are a turd,
> You are a heap of refuse,
> You have come to kill us,
> You have come to save us. (qtd in Girard, *VS* 120)

As part of the institution of ritual, religion and the category of the sacred, Girard cites the various taboos and prohibitions that surrounded early human culture and posits that these prohibitions are preventative measures against mimetic crisis. Incest taboos control the relationship between siblings, establish difference and prevent rivalry within families.[19] Rules governing the use of objects, acquisition and exchange of property likewise constrain mimetic envy. Strictures that forbid mirrors or imitative images, or that prescribe the killing of twins at birth, may signify fear of doubles and undifferentiation (see Fleming 65–66). In concert with taboos, increasingly stylised religious festivals maintain the sacred institution. Girard notes the plethora of festivals based on violation of taboos and contravention of social structures: such festivals demonstrate the necessity of prohibitions even as they formally depart from them. In

[19] Girard engages in detail with Levi-Strauss's observations of kinship systems and marriage laws (*VS* 252–283).

such festivals sexual promiscuity, even incest, may be prescribed; family and class structures are dissolved and children may disrespect their parents, slaves beat their masters, citizens hurl insults at one another; the visual spectacle may include parades of transvestite figures, clashing colours, slapstick antics and mock contests that display hyperbolised rivalry.[20] For Girard, festivals are a form of sacrificial ritual, re-enacting mimetic crisis and cathartic resolution—with a crowning sacrificial act, real or symbolic—performing the chaos of the crisis and the jubilation at its end (Girard, *VS* 137).

Girard discusses in detail his hypothesis that the scapegoat-mechanism was the means by which human society emerged from the pre-human state—that event or mechanism long-sought by anthropologists and philosophers that 'produces the differentiated, symbolic, and human forms of culture' (Girard, *TH* 103). The first scapegoat interrupts and resolves the chaos of undifferentiation at the heart of mimetic crisis. Therefore, her death is at 'the origin of structure' and 'radically generative', initiating a new order in which the imitation of that violent act, transformed into highly symbolic and ritual sacrifice, institutes and enables human culture (Girard, *VS* 105). This originary murder 'provides the nascent human community with its first truly non-instinctual form of attention'; in moving the group from the instinctive responses of animal life to the conceptual awe of the spectacle of the scapegoat's corpse, 'the victim is the originary "it", the original sign—the "transcendental signifier"—for the human group' (Fleming 75).

This aspect of Girard's theory has been comprehensively discussed elsewhere, by scholars such as Fleming, Oughourlian, Palaver, and Gans. It is, however, outside the scope of my thesis. I do not propose to utilise Girard's theory in order to consider the emergence of the human or the

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[20] Girard also notes the history of ritual periods of extreme adherence to laws, and classifies these as 'antifestivals', which exercise 'extreme caution' rather than sacrifice, in order to prevent mimetic crisis (*VS* 138).

genesis of culture, but rather to consider culture since hominisation, and that primarily in its modern forms. For this reason I turn to Girard's observations about the characteristics of the scapegoat, first as an eligible ritual victim, then as represented in the texts which Girard argues arise from ritual—myths.

A society in the midst of mimetic crisis is, according to Girard's narrative, in need of a scapegoat. I have briefly described the more essential quality of a suitable scapegoat—marginality, ensuring the absence of reprisals and an end to the cycle of violence—but Girard observes several secondary qualities that serve to make a scapegoat a particularly effective medium of catharsis for the community. He is here observing and collating the features of a range of phenomena that he classes as scapegoat-mechanisms: ancient ritual sacrifice, their modern forms in 'witch-hunts' (such as the persecution of Jews during the Black Plague), and also narrative forms, which I will elaborate on later in this chapter. These extra-eligible scapegoats are individuals who bear what Girard calls 'marks' or 'stereotypes of persecution', who possess characteristics that make them especially liable to be associated with the crisis, and to take the blame for it. These persons 'seem particularly harmful' (Girard, *SG* 14) because they bear features that in some way resemble the nature of the crisis itself.

As I have described, mimetic crisis is a state without differentiation, of loss of identity and meaning. The collapse of social and institutional forms 'obliterates or telescopes hierarchical and functional differences, so that everything has the same monotonous and monstrous aspect' (Girard, *SG* 13); boundaries are blurred and finally dissolved. Thus the stereotype that the scapegoat is accused of crimes that transgress significant boundaries (14). These may be violent crimes against those who stand for order and structure: the king, or a father. They may be sexual crimes that contravene boundaries: rape, incest or bestiality—sexual acts that cross

cultural taboos and blur crucial distinctions between categories. Possibly they are religious crimes such as profanation of the host, sinning against the distinction between holy and profane. In every case the scapegoat is accused of deliberately unleashing chaos upon the community. These moral crimes are considered to be radically virulent, an epicentre of undifferentiation that will spread, earthquake-like, through the community, leaving 'destruction of difference' in its wake (15).

Girard states that it is possible that the scapegoat really has committed such a crime, but thinks it more likely that the victim simply belongs to a class that is 'susceptible to persecution' (Girard, *SG* 17). This stereotype has to do with inherent qualities, usually physical ones. Belonging to an ethnic or religious minority renders the scapegoat not only marginal but suspect of introducing contamination into the community, the presence of a minority being analogously understood as pollution. Since one of the defining qualities of mimetic crisis is that is it contagious—because of the mimetic nature of human behaviour, not only desire but violence is imitated and repeated—any persons bearing signs of physical 'contamination' are highly eligible scapegoats. 'Sickness, madness, genetic deformities, accidental injuries' and physical 'abnormalities' of all kinds (17) are symbolic of contamination, and those possessing them are particularly likely to be seized upon and blamed for the crisis. Girard also notes that when a community habitually chooses its victims from a particular social, ethnic or religious sub-group, it 'tends to attribute to them disabilities or deformities' that reinforce their status as contaminants, observable in long-standing racist stereotypes and their modern expression in the racist cartoons of the nineteenth and twentieth century (18).

A final category of eligible victims, and perhaps an unexpected one, is that of the exceptionally above-average. While the other stereotypes generally relate to those further down the social ladder, Girard stipulates that the rich, powerful and beautiful are also eligible scapegoats

because they, too, are marginal. While in normal times such persons are protected by their elevated status, in times of crisis this status makes them outsiders with 'extreme characteristics' just like their poor or physically disabled counterparts (Girard, *SG* 18). Girard notes that sometimes those of elevated status may have deserved violent reprisals—the 'holy revolt of the oppressed' (19)—but that it can be difficult to later ascertain whether historical justifications came before or after violent uprisings. In any case, his aim is not to determine this, but rather to list those characteristics that 'tend to polarize violent crowds against those who possess them' (19).

Myths, according to Girard, are those narratives that arise out of scapegoat-rituals, telling tales of collective violence against a contaminative intruder. These myths form the oral and written testaments of early religion. Retelling the myths allows the community to experience some cathartic benefit simply through the vicarious emotion of the narrative. Myths also perpetuate the ritual practices they commemorate: the god of the myth himself demands the repetition of the community-cleansing sacrifice.

These myths represent acts of persecution in hyperbolic distortions: every element becomes fantastic. The scapegoats become not only marginal but monstrous, with profound supernatural powers to disorder and destroy, and later to re-establish order and become generative figures: founding fathers, community-birthing mothers, or gods (Girard, *SG* 54). Nevertheless, the distinguishing marks of the scapegoat-mechanism may be detected: the description of a crisis involving loss of differences; a scapegoat guilty of crimes associated with undifferentiation, and bearing some stigma of eligibility such as foreignness or physical deformity; and collective action against the scapegoat, expelling him or her from the community (24).

Girard argues that myths represent the scapegoat-mechanism in 'an extremely stylized and transfigured' fashion (Girard, *SG* 30). Myths often begin with spectacular undifferentiation: day and night are confused or not yet instituted; gods and men mingle; the earth is in drought or flood; the sun and moon are 'twins' either indistinguishable or in conflict. The theme of conflict meets the theme of undifferentiation: a battle between enemies who resemble each other closely—in the post-Vedic texts of Brahman India, Girard claims myths often begin with an 'interminable, indecisive battle between gods and demons who are so alike one can hardly tell them apart'—or perhaps brothers, especially twins. Such conflicts are a graphic representation of the reciprocity of mimetic crisis, what Girard calls 'the most classic beginning for myths everywhere' (30).

Next, the scapegoat enters the narrative, bearing the stereotypical 'marks of persecution':

> I need not point out that world mythology swarms with the lame, the blind, and the crippled or abounds with people stricken by the plague. As well as the heroes in disgrace there are those who are exceptionally beautiful and free of all blemish (Girard, *SG* 31).

The mythical scapegoat-character is often depicted beyond marginality, not only possessing those qualities listed above, but being monstrous in some way. Girard notes that mythical monsters are not creatures of pure imaginative originality, but rather they combine features of existing creatures in unnatural ways. Monsters are a spectacular embodiment of undifferentiation and category breakdown. From the Welsh *Llamhigyn Y Dwr* (a combination of bat, lizard and frog) to the Persian *Chamrosh* (dog and bird) or the Egyptian *Ammit* (lion, hippopotamus and crocodile), hybrid monsters populate the mythical world (Rose 16, 35, 81).

Girard's hypothesis regarding mythical monsters not only seeks to explain the ubiquity of monsters in myth, and more particularly the deification of such monsters, but to connect mythical narrative with real events. Whereas the presence of monsters may be perceived as 'proof of the absolutely fictitious and imaginary character of mythology', often therefore dismissed as unworthy of serious analysis, Girard claims that the theme of monsters points to real ritual sacrifices, the scapegoat-mechanism from which the myths arose (Girard, *SG* 31).

The monstrous nature of the mythical victim is not only physical but moral. As previously discussed, the scapegoat is accused of crimes of undifferentiation or taboo-breaking: bestiality, for instance, not only crosses taboos but joins man to animal in monstrous fashion. In the hyperbole of myth, the stereotypes merge and exaggerate so that physical and moral monstrosity are conflated. The rape-committer is half-animal; the physically deformed man is a father-murderer. In this way 'physical and moral monstrosity are heaped together in myths that justify the persecution of the infirm' (Girard, *SG* 35). In myth, the guilty victim is indistinguishable from his crimes. His offense is an 'ontological attribute' of his monstrous nature, a 'fantastic essence' that corrupts by its simple existence:

> In many myths the wretched person's presence is enough to contaminate everything around him, infecting men and beasts with the plague, ruining crops, poisoning food, causing game to disappear, and sowing discord around him. Everything shrivels under his feet and the grass does not grow again. He produces disasters as easily as a fig tree produces figs. He need only be himself. (Girard, *SG* 36)

Girard argues that such conflation is the 'daily fare of mythology' (Girard, *SG* 35), revealing the stereotypes of persecution in 'innumerable' myths depicting the victim as monster and therefore deserving of collective violence and expulsion.

Of course, one can hardly think of mythical monsters without calling to mind the host of spectacular creatures in Greek mythology. Girard notes that the Greek mythological canon is a list *par excellence* of scapegoat-tropes. It is worth quoting at length his roll-call, taken from Mircea Eliade's *History of Religious Ideas,* of the marginal and monstrous heroes of Greek myth:

> [the heroes] are distinguished by their strength and beauty but also by monstrous characteristics ([gigantic] stature–Heracles, Achilles, Orestes, Pelops–but also stature [much shorter] than the average); or they are [theriomorphic] (Lycaon, the "wolf") or able to change themselves into animals. They are androgynous (Cecrops), or change their sex (Teiresias), or dress like women (Heracles). In addition, the heroes are characterized by numerous anomalies (acephaly or poly-cephaly: Heracles has three rows of teeth); they are apt to be lame, one-eyed or blind. Heroes often fall victim to insanity (Orestes, Bellerophon, even the exceptional Heracles, when he slaughtered his sons by Megara). As for their sexual behavior, it is excessive or aberrant: Heracles impregnates the fifty daughters of Thespius in one night; Theseus is famous for his numerous rapes (Helen, Ariadne, etc.); Achilles ravishes Stratonice. The heroes commit incest with their daughters or their mothers and indulge in massacres from envy or anger or often for no reason at all: they even slaughter their fathers and mothers or their relatives. (Girard, *SG* 34–35)

In this context, the extra canine teeth of the Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides* and the sexual undifferentiation in *The Ice Storm,* among other examples, become highly relevant to reading those novels as modern tragedies which are evolved myths.

Scholars have noted the evolution from Greek mythology to the theatrical tragedies of Greek theatre. Some, like Alan Sommerstein, have focused on the narrative or dramatic continuum, since 'myth was the basis of well over 99 percent of all the tragedies that were written' (Sommerstein 163). Others have paid more attention to the fact that myth and religious ritual are inextricably and crucially linked, notably Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood whose *Tragedy and Athenian Religion* (2003) makes a detailed case that Greek tragedies were understood by ancient audiences as 'ritual performances', rather than as merely theatrical entertainment, or even as theatre framed by, or inspired by, ritual (see also Sourvinou-Inwood, "Greek Tragedy and Ritual" 10). She refers to work in recent decades demonstrating scholarly acceptance of the centrality of ritual to tragedy, citing Zeitlin, Easterling, Friedrich and Goldhill (as well as Vidal-Naquet and Vernant in French) among those who have moved away from previous critical 'implicit perception of Greek tragic performances through the filter of modern theatrical experiences' that led to the 'implicit underprivileging of their ritual context and the concentration on their content, taken in isolation, wrenched from that context' (17).[21]

Girard, along with the above scholars, sees Greek tragedy continuing the function of ritual, festival and myth in a new medium. For Girard, this function is the performance of the scapegoat-mechanism. As Greek society becomes more 'civilised', especially in moving away from human sacrifice, tragedy '[takes] over the role of ritual' (Girard, *VS* 331) in the spectacular performance of the scapegoat-sacrifice:

> Once upon a time [there was] a temple and an altar on which the victim was sacrificed … now there is an amphitheater and a stage on which the fate of the katharma, played out by an actor, will purge the spectators of their passions and provoke a new

[21] See also Sir A. Pickard-Cambridge and M.S. Silk on Greek tragedy in its ritual and cultural context (Pickard-Cambridge 47; Silk 113).

> katharsis, both individual and collective. This katharsis will restore the health and well-being of the community. (Girard, *VS* 331)

Girard uses the term '*katharsis*' deliberately, and supports his argument by noting Aristotle's belief that catharsis-provision was the function of tragedy. He claims that, in describing tragic catharsis, Aristotle was 'assert[ing] that tragedy can and should assume at least some of the functions assigned to ritual in a world where ritual has almost disappeared' (Girard, *VS* 331). In fact, Girard describes the *Poetics* as 'something of a manual of sacrificial practices', in which Aristotle's remarks about the tragic hero fit rather well with Girard's qualifications for the scapegoat. A sacrificial victim must be marginal, part of the community as symbolic contagion, but sufficiently an outsider so as to be sacrificable without reprisals. Aristotle's ideal hero is neither wholly good, nor wholly bad but 'intermediate': neither 'someone who is like ourselves' nor 'a very wicked person' (Aristotle 21). Thus the audience may identify with him and yet, because of some 'tragic flaw', will abandon him to his deserved fate.

The thematic grounds of tragedy, too, coincide with Girard's narrative of mimetic crisis. Tragedies often turn on destruction of the cultural order, abolition of distinctions or sins against them. Conflict turns into violent reciprocity, as enemies meet one another in escalating acts of imitative violence. These acts may be physical, but are also represented in the common verbal stichomythia of two tragic antagonists whose dialogue becomes a frantic back-and-forth, as they 'exchange insults and accusations with increasing earnestness and rapidity' (Girard, *VS* 49). Violence and destruction are contagious, with 'plagues and pestilences, civil and foreign wars' threatening to take lives and destroy social structures. Localised crises, like the death of a royal family member, are presented as 'the tip of the iceberg', suggesting that the catastrophe may have a domino-effect that causes the entire *polis* to collapse (49).

The plot of a tragedy often follows the sequence of the scapegoat-myth: a previously stable community is struck by a sudden and terrible crisis; the tragic hero is revealed to be the cause of the crisis, responsible for the intrusion of evil to the community; the hero suffers terribly, is consequently killed or exiled, and peace is restored at the hero's cost. Thus the vicarious audience of tragedy participates in the sacrificial ritual, and feels a cathartic benefit at its conclusion (Girard, *VS* 290). The story of Oedipus follows this pattern: the city of Thebes is disrupted by Oedipus's acts, and he gauges out his own eyes and flees the city in order to save it. As well as following the basic plot of the scapegoat-mechanism, the Oedipus myth is replete with Girardian stereotypes (Girard, *SG* 25). A plague is ravaging Thebes, symbolic of contagion and undifferentiation. The cause of the plague is found to be one who has committed crimes against difference and order: Oedipus has murdered his father and married his mother. Oedipus himself bears so many of the signs of the scapegoat as to be excessive: he has a limp, he is a stranger, a foreigner, and a king.

Girard attended to the Oedipus story at length in *Violence and the Sacred* and *The Scapegoat*, and used it to illustrate and support his theory through the development of his later works. Sophocles' tragic retelling of the Oedipus myth is particularly useful to Girardian theory because it exemplifies not only the stereotypes of persecution, but also the 'progress in the direction of mythical dismantling' (Girard, *VS* 95) that Girard finds in some Greek tragedies. This progress is the 'suspicion' of the sacrificial mechanism behind the expulsion of the victim. In Sophocles' case, this is the presence in his text of two things: first, so many explicit stereotypes of persecution, potentially suggesting that Oedipus is a convenient scapegoat rather than truly guilty; secondly, the assertion in the play itself that Laius was killed by a group, not an individual. Girard reads Sophocles as 'strew[ing] his text with suggestions' (Girard, *SG* 122) that Oedipus's guilt is in question. The testimony that Laius was killed by a crowd is relied upon by Oedipus to clear his name, but never returned to in the narrative. The accusations and counter-

accusations between Oedipus and Tiresias become so similar as to imply undifferentiation, a state in which nothing can be true or false until a scapegoat is seized upon—and then the narrative imperative is to seize the most convenient scapegoat as quickly as possible.

Girard believes that Sophocles' suspicion of myth 'goes quite far', but is 'elusive' and cannot be fully expressed within the constraints of the original Oedipus myth, which (*Aristoteles dixit*) Sophocles may not modify. His culture forbids him to reveal the principle of the scapegoat, and thus 'tragic subversion has its limits' (Girard, *SG* 123). Sophocles may not 'demolish the mythological framework in which he operates', and so his tragedy contains its own inner conflicts, an internal struggle that is never resolved (123). The authority of myth is shaken but not toppled, and the 'inner workings' of the scapegoat-mechanism are not revealed (123).

The next aspect of Girard's theory is his examination of the texts of an alternative culture not subject to those restrictions placed upon Sophocles: the narratives in the Judeo-Christian Bible. Girard's pre-eminent example of a contrasted close reading of Greek versus Jewish myth is his comparison of the Greek *Oedipus* to the Old Testament story of Joseph. In both narratives, a crisis in a family precipitates the expulsion of a son while he is still a child. In *Oedipus*, it is the prophecy, and in Joseph, the jealousy of his brothers. The two young men become foreigners in a new place: Thebes and Egypt. Oedipus is accused of incest with Jocasta; Joseph is accused of the rape of the wife of Potiphar, his father figure. Oedipus escapes the Sphinx by solving her enigma; Joseph deciphers dream-puzzles for the Pharaoh. Both Thebes and Egypt experience environmental crises: plague and famine. So much for the similarities. But the difference between the two narratives, for Girard, is crucial: Oedipus is portrayed as guilty and Joseph as innocent. In the Oedipus myth, the hero is represented as truly guilty of incest and murder, and the plague as the genuine result of his awful crimes. Joseph is innocent of the rape of Potiphar's

wife, and far from being responsible for the famine, is the administrator of Egypt's survival. This is the 'impassable gulf' between classical myths and Biblical myths: in the former, the victim is always guilty, and his persecutors are always justified. On the question of whether the hero deserves to be expelled, the myths answer 'yes' and the Biblical texts 'no'.

Similarly, the Psalms take the side of the victims against their persecutors. In their litanies of grievance, seeking comfort or vindication, the Psalms allow those who would otherwise 'become silent victims in the world of myth' to 'voice their complaint' against the persecutory mob (Girard, *ISS* 116). The speakers in the Psalms 'curse their persecutors loud and long', in what Girard claims 'may be the oldest texts in the world to let the voice of the victims… be heard' (116). The book of Job, likewise, is a 'super-Psalm' in which the mob accuses Job and he not only defends himself but 'wrests the deity' away from the imagination of the mob to 'envision him as the God of victims, not of persecutors' (116). [22]

For the sake of clarity I refer henceforth to 'myth' meaning primitive or classical myths, and do not use the term to describe those myths recorded in the Old Testament, which I call 'Biblical' or 'Scriptural' texts. This does not imply a difference in the ostensible 'truth' of one versus the other: like Girard, I assume that what matters about both categories of texts is not their literal fidelity to historical facts, but whether their allegiance is with the persecutor or the victim. This is truth of one kind but it does not preclude the Biblical texts from using fictional or mythical techniques whilst remaining transparent about the innocence of the scapegoat. Using the term

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[22] Other critics have described Christianity as opposed to tragedy, but with other justifications. Steiner, in his *Death of Tragedy*, declares that 'the metaphysics of Christianity [is] anti-tragic', but does not note the persecutor/victim-text dichotomy found by Girard. Rather, he contrasts a 'Greek sense of tragic unreason' with Jewish and Christian 'rational insight' (*The Death of Tragedy* 70, 324). Such a contrast may be read as a Girardian split between unjust, 'unreasonable' cathartic violence and the 'insight' of Biblical texts. For Simon Goldhill, Christianity is hostile to tragedy because 'the hope of Christianity threatens the tragedy of the tragic end. Suffering is reconstrued as a challenge to faith to be transcended in the promise of eternal life' (11).

'myth' to refer exclusively to non-Scriptural texts also allows me to follow Girard in describing Scriptural texts as 'anti-mythical' without undue confusion.

Conventional myths are what Girard calls 'texts of persecution', in which the story is told from the persecutors' point of view. The scapegoat-effect catharsis works because the scapegoat is truly perceived as guilty, and his death as a real purging of evil from amongst the community. There is no possibility admitted that the scapegoat is an innocent victim of collective violence, since 'an arbitrary victim would not reconcile a disturbed community if its members realised they [are] dupes' (Mimesis 14). By contrast, the Judeo-Christian Biblical narratives absolve the victim and blame the persecutors, taking 'the perspective of the victim', and revealing that the scapegoat-mechanism is the action of a community that 'happens to be disturbed and is... looking for scapegoat relief' (Girard, "Mimesis" 17); thus for Girard, the Biblical narratives represent an entirely unique genre of 'anti-mythical' texts. Girard carefully stipulates that the tendency of Biblical narratives, noted by Nietzsche and Marx, to 'favor the victims, especially if they are Jewish' (Girard, *ISS* 114), does not mean that the anti-victim stance of myth and the pro-victim stance of the Bible are equivalent prejudices. The reason he gives for this is simply that those narratives which exonerate the victim are *right*: the victims seized upon by communities in crisis are *not* responsible for mimetic crisis, but rather they are efficacious loci for absorbing the escalating violence. This insight goes beyond resentment or ethnocentrism to an awareness of the mechanism at the core of human culture. Girard argues that such a position is not merely ethical or 'moralistic' but *epistemological*: it reveals the mechanisms of violence that create and sustain culture and order. This is not to say that Jewish experience played no part in this discernment:

> The Jewish people, tossed from expulsion to expulsion, are certainly well placed to put the myths in question and to detect in them more quickly than many other peoples the

> scapegoat phenomena of which they are often the victims. They demonstrate exceptional discernment in the matter of persecutory crowds and their tendency to close ranks against foreigners, those who are isolated, the crippled, the disabled of all sorts. This advantage, gained at a high price throughout history, does nothing to diminish the universality of the Biblical truth… (Girard, *ISS* 114)

The question of whether the insights of Biblical texts were derived from some divine source led Girard to a religious conversion: Girard's subsequent explorations of Biblical interpretation, and the theological implications of Girard's reading of Biblical texts, fall outside the scope of this thesis. My focus remains on Girard's observations about texts themselves and their function as narrative performances of the scapegoat-mechanism, or in the case of the Biblical texts, performances that undermine and destabilise sacrificial catharsis. For the purposes of this thesis I will refer to these two categories of text as the *sacrificial* and the *Scriptural*: the first, which Girard calls persecutor-texts, depicting the scapegoat as guilty of polluting the community and deserving of expulsion or death; the second, which Girard calls victim-texts, depicting the scapegoat as innocent and the victim of that violence which results from mimetic crisis.

It is important to note that Girard does not claim that Judeo-Christian Scripture has a monopoly on 'anti-sacrificial' insight—he devoted an entire book (*Sacrifice*) to discussion of the anti-sacrificial in the Brahmanas of Vedic India—but rather that Judeo-Christian Scripture is the major such influence on Western culture. Girard also notes that Western texts declaring the innocence of the victim exist before and outside Judeo-Christian Scripture. He later returned to Sophocles and declared that *Antigone* achieves what *Oedipus* does not—a sustained critique and subversion of the sacrificial narrative—but he argues that works such as *Antigone* are 'isolated examples' of texts and writers working across the grain of their dominant culture, as opposed to

the predominance of 'anti-mythical' narrative in Jewish culture (Girard, *SG* 199). This culture evolved and branched into early Christianity, and Judeo-Christian culture became the dominant culture of Western civilisation. Girard describes institutional Christianity as 'a tyrannical oppressor and persecutor', 'blind' to the perversity of violence, despite the defence of the victims in its narratives (201). Nevertheless, he claims that modern Western society is the result of a 'complex interaction' between the insight of Biblical narratives and the sacrificial impulses of communities in crisis. The influence of Judeo-Christian Scriptural narratives on the modern Western imagination is a 'force of disruption' to the scapegoat-mechanism.

Girard engages in detail with Nietzsche's idea of Christianity having a 'slave morality', championing the weak victims rather than the aggressors. Girard actually sees Nietzsche as his intellectual predecessor, since Nietzsche radically reframed Christianity not as one of many death-and-resurrection cults but as a unique religion whose God was the 'god of victims' (Girard, *TGR* 244). For Nietzsche, Judaism and Christianity are 'revenge fantasies against the victors of history' (Fleming 125)—resentment as religion. Girard argues that Nietzsche was correct in his apprehension of Christianity as uniquely on the side of the persecuted, but wrong to think that a return to Dionysian violence is desirable. In fact, Girard argues that resentment itself only came to dominance in the nineteenth century because of the influence of Judeo-Christian Scripture and culture: resentment is 'weakened vengeance', the impulse to violence diluted but not destroyed (Girard, *TGR* 244). Widespread resentment is thus, for Girard, the result of Christianity, not the cause. He claims that the 'deceptive quiet' of Nietzsche's post-Christian society was absent of real vengeance in the sense of mass cultural violence, and thus Nietzsche might indulge in the 'luxury' of resenting resentment itself, of calling on Dionysus to bring back generative sacrificial violence instead of the weak stasis of nineteenth century class envy (244). This attitude of 'frivolity' could only exist, Girard argues, in 'privileged centuries' and privileged nations 'where real vengeance had retreated so much that its terror had become

unintelligible' (251). He contrasts this time with the twentieth century, in which 'real vengeance' is again a reality with the technological capacities of nuclear and other mass weaponry, which reduce the Earth to a 'global primitive village' (253). In such a time, Western society is once again 'terrified… by the possibility of unlimited blood feud' and in need of solutions other than Nietzsche's Dionysian fantasies (253).

What such solutions may be, especially the possibility of positive mimesis—mimetic behaviour leading to beneficent ends—has occupied both Girard and those exploring his theory in recent years. Such explorations span analyses of politics, economics, social science and religion, and fall mainly outside the scope of this thesis. However, I am interested in Girard's observations about the place of sacrificial violence in post-Christian, 'de-mythologised' Western culture:

> Victimage is still present among us, of course, but in degenerate forms that do not produce the type of mythical reconciliation and ritual practice exemplified by primitive cults. This lack of efficiency often means that there are more rather than fewer victims. As in the case of drugs, consumers of sacrifice tend to increase the doses when the effect becomes more difficult to achieve. (Girard, "Mimesis" 16)

A community torn apart by collective desire can only use the scapegoat-mechanism to recohere so far as they can believe in the guilt of their victim. Victim-texts undermine such belief. Without truly believing in the malevolent *or* beneficent power of the scapegoat, we are stuck with 'our inability to transfigure our victims' (Girard, "Mimesis" 16) and cannot benefit from the scapegoat-effect. In other words, we continue to persecute and victimise, but no longer truly believe in the guilt of our victims—we can therefore make scapegoats, but not turn them

into gods. In Girard's words, 'we haven't given up having scapegoats, but our belief in them is 90% spoiled' (*ISS* 157).[23]

The demythologising influence of Judeo-Christian Biblical narrative has bequeathed to modern society an awareness of the scapegoat-mechanism and thus made true scapegoat-catharsis impossible. But this awareness is only beneficial insofar as we are therefore able to renounce scapegoating—and this is apparently not very far. Rather than ceasing to scapegoat, we increase our violence and persecution. Blaming and expelling some members of the community is briefly, imperfectly, cathartic, and before the catharsis can be called into question we perform another sacrifice. Girard sees this idea in the apocalyptic vision of Christian Scripture—the apocalypse being human violence retaliating back and forth, always escalating, until the whole world is a war zone.[24] Girard says that 'Christianity is the only religion that has foreseen its own failure': Judeo-Christian Scripture, according to Girard, describes a future in which humanity, rather than 'renouncing retaliation', instead chooses escalating violence (Girard, "War"). Girard has commented on this apocalyptic vision in detail, especially since the events of September 2001 and the escalation of global hostilities since, and in fact most of his work in recent decades has focused on analysis of 'real-world' conflict rather than narrative performances. In this thesis, I aim to explore the implications of Girard's theory for reading novels of the twentieth century in the context of his notion of a 'complex interaction' between the sacrificial and the Scriptural in modern Western culture, picking up where Girard left off in his few provocative remarks about modern myth and tragedy.

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[23] Detailed exposition of this thesis can be found in *I See Satan*, 143-159.

[24] Girard engages with, and argues against, the common notion of apocalypse as God's violence against man, describing this view as 'mythological' rather than consistent with Judeo-Christian Scripture, held by those who 'cannot do without a cruel God' and who do not see that human retaliatory violence is 'entirely sufficient' to bring about apocalyptic destruction (Girard, "War" n.p.).

In Girardian terms, tragedy is the textual performance of catharsis—sacrifice of a scapegoat and subsequent relief—and in its exemplary forms contains all the essential narrative elements of myth, depicting mimetic crisis: mimetic desire, rivalry, escalating conflict, undifferentiation, transgression, blame, violence, and restoration of order. Girard reads some Greek tragedians as testing the boundaries of the genre, playing with the notion of the innocent victim, but producing texts that are constrained in their capacity to work against the narrative current of catharsis. He argues that only the pervasive cultural shift of Judeo-Christianity towards 'siding with the victim' results in narratives that entirely exonerate the victim and blame a malicious community—narratives that are anti-cathartic texts, anti-tragedies.

Girard lauds those modern writers who have written such 'anti-tragedies', singling out Goethe and Lord Byron as examples of commendable resistance:

> [The Gospel of John] is written in opposition to sacrifice, as are... the story of Faust or Don Juan... thus the few modern myths are not real myths because they do not accept the final sacrifice without reservation... instead of reflecting the vision of persecution, they refuse the form of sacrifice and denounce it as an abomination. (Girard, *SG* 143)

Girard's theory does not propose a simple cultural switch *in toto* from tragic to anti-tragic texts. Rather, the influence of Judeo-Christian victim-texts, and the victim-texts that follow, problematise and complicate the performance of catharsis both in real-world conflicts and upon the tragic stage.

This is not to say that tragedy as a form has one fixed meaning, which has remained stable over thousands of years. As Raymond Williams shows in *Modern Tragedy* (1966), the New Critical idea of tragedy as a continuous textual tradition (perhaps even as evidence of a homogenous Western civilisation) is not supported by genuine examination of the history of the term and of

those texts grouped within it. Rather, Williams sees profoundly different expressions of tragedy across the ages, whose meanings shift depending on local contexts (see also Grady 790). Likewise Foley and Howard, in their introduction to a recent collection of musings on tragedy, assert that tragedy 'has meaning in particular contexts of production and reception, and its meaning will change as the contexts change' (Foley and Howard 620), citing as an example a performance of *Antigone* in post-dictatorship Uruguay. Nor do I argue that tragedy has only one function, the same at all times and in all places; rather, I am simply considering the Girardian-catharsis-function of tragedy as one potential function among many, and that in the context of twentieth century America.

2. The American Dream

2.1. A Mythical History

In this section I will trace the concept of the American Dream through selected portions of two non-fiction works: Jim Cullen's *The American Dream* and Andrew Delbanco's *The American Dream*. I will argue that there is a consistency, a continuity, between the imagined American narrative writ large in these non-fiction texts, and the microcosms of the American Dream represented in the selected novel texts to follow. Specifically, in both sets of texts, I find exploration and negotiation of key tragic themes: desire, individualism versus communalism, contagion, crisis and catharsis. Reading these texts through Girard's theory makes evident a recurring narrative attention to the subjects of rivalrous desire, fear of pollution and contagion, and communal hostility to victims bearing 'marks of persecution'. In other words, I will argue that the American Dream is a narrative participating in the tradition of the tragic.

I am not seeking a fixed definition of the American Dream, nor an accurate historical record of events in the American nation. Rather, I am reading these texts for their discursive negotiation of the *idea* of America, named as the imagined Dream, which the authors themselves describe as a sustaining myth rather than a lived reality. I am also not attempting a broad overview of the many contributing factors to the notion of the American Dream, but have selected these texts for their telling of two formative moments in the Dream's development: the Puritan migration and the 'sacred state' of the Union under Abraham Lincoln.

In drawing parallels between these texts and the 'meta-narrative' of Girard's theory, I aim not to prove that Girardian theory explains human social dynamics, but something subtler: that a culture which builds a mythology of itself based on competitive acquisition of objects of desire, and which attempts to locate transcendence in the mechanisms of this acquisitory and sacrificial

system, is a culture that may be expected to produce narratives that affirm and perpetuate this mythology, as well as narratives that problematise it. The enduring mythology of the Dream, laid out in these two texts, is the long-standing and pervasive cultural context of my chosen novels—and as I have previously noted, tragedies do not function in a vacuum, but participate in the discourse of their historical time and place. If, as I shall later argue, *The Virgin Suicides*, *The Ice Storm* and *Revolutionary Road* are tragedies that problematise the tragic catharsis, it is of significance that they are products of a culture that is deeply invested in the tragic—by which I mean a mythology of desire, crisis and sacrifice.

The Puritan settlement on the continent of America was an attempt to found and build a new world—a place to make dreams a reality. Much has been written about the Puritan enterprise, but I am specifically interested in the aspects of the Puritan experience that have resonated down the centuries and formed part of the modern mythology of the American Dream. I have therefore selected for consideration the first chapter of Jim Cullen's book *The American Dream*, titled 'The Puritans'.

My discussion of 'the Puritans' in the proceeding pages should be understood not as an analysis of the lived experience of early migrants to America, but a consideration of an imagined group of people: Cullen's Puritans, the Puritans on the pages of a book titled *The American Dream*, released at the opening of the twenty-first century. I am interested in the ways in which history becomes mythology—the shaping of remembered events into a narrative that becomes an authoritative story about national identity and purpose. I will therefore read Cullen's history of the Puritans as indicative of the traces left by the Puritan generations on the American imagination, and take notice of the Girardian themes that make an appearance: dissatisfaction and desire, fear of pollution or contagion, the centrality of community and the benefits and

drawbacks of homogeneity, and the mechanisms for recohering the community when inevitable divisions and conflicts arise.

The Puritan migration to America, in Cullen's telling, began with a dream: 'the free new world of their dreams was to be a place of, by, and for the Puritans' (Cullen 21). They dreamt of a world where they could realise their ideals of religious purity and devout work. At the heart of the Puritan dream was the belief that the world could be made a 'better, more holy place' (34); that striving was worthwhile; that improvement and ascension to a higher plane were possible.

The models of the first generation of Puritans were imagined ones. They knew, from their distaste for the Church at home in England, what they did not want to be; they imagined an alternative ideal. But the second generation rapidly turned their eyes to nearer, more concrete models, in the form of the first generation. Despite the Puritan endeavour to build a new society that got better with every year: 'as the first generation of Puritans died off and their children took their place, a persistent mantra seems to run through the Puritans' copious commentaries: we are not the men our fathers were' (Cullen 29).

The restlessness of mimetic desire is evident here. The first generation Puritans were dissatisfied, seeking a particular object of desire: to make themselves and their community better. The second generation inherited that dissatisfaction, and projected onto their forefathers an imagined character and ability to achieve the elusive object of desire, which they themselves found so difficult to attain. The first generation became idealised models that the second generation set themselves to imitate. But perhaps the difficulty of attaining their dream was not, in fact, due to any inferiority of the second generation, but to the inherent elusiveness of the object. In Girardian terms, perhaps the nature of the Puritan dream was self-defeating.

The traditional name for the object that the Puritans desired so much is 'freedom'. Freedom to worship as they believed right, freedom from the control of what they saw as a corrupt Church in England. The other obviously apt word for the object of their legendary desire is 'purity'. The Puritans acquired their name because they aspired to purity, though some onlookers were snide about this: 'We call you Puritans,' an English clergyman wrote in the early seventeenth century, 'not because you are purer than other men...but because you think yourselves to be purer' (qtd in Cullen 12). The Puritans dreamed of a community free from pollution. Puritan minister Solomon Stoddard wrote that they 'would not have left England merely for their own quietness; but they were afraid that their children would be corrupted there' (qtd in 16). The perceived threat of impurity and contagion is clear—and like all communities threatened by contagious infection, the Puritans sought to purge it from their midst. In this case, though, being unable to expel the Church from England, they removed themselves 'as far away from England and its Church as possible' (15). In Cullen's words, every Puritan dreamed of a world free from 'pollution of his religious practice' (26). So what kind of social environment did the Puritans seek to establish that would facilitate this? Foundationally, it was an environment that emphasised interrelatedness and communality. Purity would come from establishing a community of commonly-held 'pure' values. Yet this communality would have its limits and its tensions.

The Puritan community was negotiating a thin line between communality and hierarchy. In Girardian terms, they needed enough in common to sustain communal bonds, perceiving themselves as engaged in a common enterprise and united against common threats or enemies—what Cullen calls 'a sense of community: not a philosophical or legal framework so much as a series of deep emotional and affective bonds that connected people who had a shared sense of what their lives were about' (Cullen 22). Yet in order to prevent mimetic crisis, they needed to not be *too* alike, maintaining differences of identity and status. Cullen's

examination of 'one of the great early addresses of American history', John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity", reveals the tension between equality and hierarchy in the Puritan community.

In his address, Winthrop declares that differing social status and wealth are part of God's divine order—which of course implies that any alteration to, or disruption of, this order is an offense against divine ordinance. In Winthrop's words,

> "God Almighty in his holy and wise providence hath so disposed the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and duty, others mean and in subjection…" (Qtd in Cullen 23)

For Winthrop, it is right and good that some people should be 'eminent' and others 'in subjection', a picture of a society with clear and insoluble social strata and boundaries. As Cullen describes, Winthrop believed that God 'ordered these differences': he strove to prevent the establishment of democratic elections, 'affirmed sacred and secular hierarchy', and 'exhorted the Puritans to *maintain that order'* (Cullen 23) (my emphasis). So why was it so crucial to maintain this order, a structure of stratified differences? "For the preservation," said Winthrop, "and good of the *whole*." In Girardian terms, the preacher intuited that social boundaries and strata protect against rivalry and internal mediation. The community is safely preserved by adhering to this system.

However, the notion of social hierarchies, with one man in a superior position to another, was not sufficient to the ideals of Winthrop and his Puritan fellows. Believing as they did that all were equally in need of salvation and dependent upon God's mercy, that no human soul was worth more than another, the Puritans needed an important proviso to the notion that some were 'eminent' and some 'mean'. They found this proviso in the notion that while people may

have had radically different circumstances, these circumstances were not a reflection of a person's inherent worth: "No man is made more honorable than another or more wealthy, etc., out of any particular and singular respect to himself, but for the glory of his creator and the common good of the creature, man…" (Qtd in Cullen 23).

In this worldview, men are raised high or brought low according to God's will, for the ultimate common good. By accepting one's lot in life as part of God's divine plan for the whole community, even if that lot was to be 'in subjection', the members of the Puritan community could be both stratified and unified. Winthrop exhorted his listeners to think of themselves as cogwheels in a greater machine, whether 'eminent' or not, and to consider one another as intimately bonded collaborators with a single inspiration and vision. Winthrop's language is repeatedly, insistently, communal:

> "We must delight in each other, make others' condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body." (Cullen 23)

The tension here is clear. The Puritans' ideal society is one in which the equality of every citizen under God is preached—but one in which social stratification is ordered by that same God. They imagined a new world in which God's order would be upheld, and purity—freedom from corruption and breakdown—would be the result. 'Perhaps inevitably,' Cullen drily remarks, 'things didn't turn out as planned' (Cullen 24). The protagonists of this early American story want to have it all—communality and stratification, pious acceptance of one's lot and the pioneer spirit of individual endeavour: 'the course of events in New England was shaped not only by material conditions and timeless human impulses (like greed) but also by aspirations that pulled people apart in literal as well as figurative ways' (25).

The above quote encapsulates what I read as the various forces that complicated the Puritan enterprise of Cullen's retelling. Firstly, the material conditions of inequality which, despite the preachers' exhortations, not all citizens were prepared to accept. Secondly, the 'timeless human impulse' that Cullen calls greed, and I am calling mimetic desire: that restless dissatisfaction, the perpetual dream of more and better. The third element is the result of the first two: aspirations that pulled people apart and threatened community cohesion—in other words, mimetic crisis.

As the Puritans began to establish themselves (and their local economy) in the new world, the opportunities for individual achievement multiplied. As one contemporary reported, 'for now as their stocks increased, and the increase vendible, there was no longer any holding them together…' (Cullen 25). Individual acquisition of objects of desire became more important than 'delighting' in being a part of the 'same body'.

Being a part of the 'same body' meant to cooperate or otherwise compete, within the same internal space—and inevitably, disagreements and rivalries broke out. Some members of the community are described as packing up and fleeing. Others stayed and fought for their ideals, campaigning for the expulsion of others. Cullen describes the Puritans' disunity as occurring 'despite an unusual degree of social homogeneity'; a Girardian analysis might conclude that disunity happens inevitably, and under conditions of homogeneity all the sooner. Regardless, 'one fact was unmistakably clear: the Puritans were unable to create a harmonious community in their new home, succumbing to all too human foibles' (Cullen 28). Cullen describes a 'sense of brittle bitterness' (32) weighing upon the Puritans, a 'widespread sense of melancholy over the limits of the Puritans' achievements and the failure of ideals to meet up with realities' (29). This tale of the Puritan enterprise becomes one of crisis management.

Cullen describes the world of the Puritans, for all their 'homogeneous' dreams, as 'marked by factions and sectarianism' (Cullen 26). Communal bonds were continually under threat as one

crisis after another rocked their society. One of the most significant crises was the 'Antinomian crisis', in the mid-1630s. Antinomianism held that the individual conscience was primary, and nobody but God could guide or judge an individual's conscientious actions. While at first glance such an idea might be viewed as compatible with the Puritans' strict belief in God as the only arbiter of salvation, Antinomianism threatened the communality of the Puritan project:

> It would only be a matter of time before an individual's beliefs would lead to the rejection of all outside authority, since just about any law, sacred or secular, could be perceived as trampling on a personal conscience. Any form of collective governance would be impossible. What to some might seem like an American Dream of religious freedom was to others a nightmarish prescription for anarchy. (Cullen 26)

Anarchy was decidedly not what the Puritans dreamt of unleashing in their new world. The Puritans sought to build 'a new society of believers' (Cullen 15), united and interdependent. In Cullen's words, 'Religious toleration was out of the question': the Puritans had not braved the open oceans, left behind their homes, and subdued the wilderness only to 'accept the indolence, conflict, or obvious evil that had marred the Holland and England they had left' (22). Rebellion must be nipped in the bud before its corrupting influence could break their community apart. Cullen's description of the Puritan's difficult situation is a narrative, familiar from tragedy, of rivalry, crisis and attempted catharsis.

Puritan poets, such as Michael Wigglesworth, characterised environmental phenomena like droughts as warnings from God of a pending 'Day of Doom' (Cullen 29), a tragic trope familiar from both Biblical and classical narratives. Cullen focuses at length on tales of the Puritan community's attempts to curb the growing crisis by uniting against those they branded as pollutants—evil influences who threatened the purity and stability of their communities—and expelling them.

One casualty of the Antinomian crisis was Anne Hutchinson, an eloquent and educated woman whose championing of Antinomianism resulted in her trial for 'traducing the ministers and their ministry' (Cullen 27). Despite her articulate piety and comprehensive Scriptural knowledge, she was found guilty of heresy and banished from the colony (27). Cullen describes Anne Hutchinson's treatment in explicitly Girardian terms: 'a woman ended up as the scapegoat of the affair' (27). Other troublemakers were dealt with in the same way. Roger Williams, once a 'well-liked' man, disrupted the communal peace by broadcasting many controversial statements, including suggesting that the acquisition of land from the American Indians had been illegal. In 1635 the General Court found him guilty of sedition and heresy, spreading 'diverse, new, and dangerous opinions' (R. Williams 13), and he was banished.

After the 1688 Glorious Revolution in England, the crowning of William of Orange (an avowed Protestant), and the subsequent Act of Toleration, 'the Puritan insistence on a narrowly defined religious orthodoxy was regarded as needlessly divisive' (Cullen 31). The Puritans 'were told in no uncertain terms they could no longer persecute religious minorities with impunity' (31). In Cullen's telling, persecuting theological outliers had been part of the cathartic system of Puritan society; in order to maintain their unity some new sacrificial objects were required. Thus, Cullen's Puritans looked within themselves for the polluting influence of sin to blame for their failures, and to violently expel. Revival movements such as the 'First Great Awakening' of the 1740s exhorted believers to 're-dedicate' themselves to 'original ideals', replacing tainted spiritual laziness with pure 'spiritual rigor' (30), lest they become the subjects of a classic Puritan sermon of the time: "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (30).

Of course, their own lapsed piety was not the only enemy 'on the inside' that the Puritans could blame and persecute: the devil, the ultimate corrupter, was also feared. The Salem witch trials of 1692 were a major campaign to purge evil influence from within their community. Many

scholars have investigated the Salem witchcraft hysteria, and much of their discussion is outside the scope of this chapter. Cullen acknowledges the complexity of the event but focuses his attention on the cathartic element of the expulsions: in Cullen's telling, the witch trials and executions are a scapegoat-ritual *par excellence*:

> Once again, this was a prismatic historical event that has been subject to multiple interpretations: sexual anxiety, economic distress, psychological trauma, and (especially) political hysteria. It was, surely, all these things. But [particularly] the witch trials represented *a grotesque effort to recapture a sense of lost cohesion*, a lingering longing for communion curdled into a dictatorship of false virtue… (Cullen 32 my emphasis)

Thus for Cullen, the witch trials are a violent attempt to recohere a fragmenting community through the expulsion of unfortunate victims.[25] The Puritans were reunited under the Church roof. A member of the Puritan flock could find renewed identity and communal cohesion in the expulsion of witches (of course, only until the accusing finger pointed at her).

According to Girardian theory, the more effective the scapegoat-ritual, the more triumphant the subsequent textual narratives that retell the community's stories (Girard, *SG* 54). Although later generations found plenty to criticise in the Salem witch hunts, it seems to have had a galvanising effect on the community of the time. Just seven years after that grisly affair, Cotton Mather, a leading Puritan figure, published a history of the Puritans in 1702, which he titled *Magnalia Christi Americana* ("The Great Achievements of Christ in America"), and which is characterised by what Cullen calls 'a triumphal note that rarely wavers' (Cullen 33). Cullen's

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[25] Other scholars have agreed, such as King and Mixon, who argue that whether out of religious piety, political strategy, or commercial greed, 'the Salem ministers used the hysteria to effect an increase in the demand for salvation' and thus to shore up the 'ambiguous boundaries' between Church members and outsiders in an increasingly secularised Salem village (King and Mixon 680).

American Dream is the story of a community who found that scapegoat-expulsions made them stronger, and enabled them to continue the pursuit of their dreams.

Cullen's telling of the Puritans' story is hallmarked by themes that reappear again and again in later chapters of his meditation on the American Dream: desire-driven Dreamers who aspire to a better tomorrow; fear of pollution or compromise; the importance and dangers of communality; the tension between ideals and disappointing realities. These are all Girardian themes, too. Cullen describes the Puritans' 'inexhaustible appetite' for new frontiers as driven by 'lust' for acquisition of wealth, and 'desire for freedom from the burden of community' (Cullen 25)—in Girardian terms, desire to acquire objects and to escape the contagion and rivalry of internal mediation.

How much these notions formed a conscious part of the Puritans' experience may not be calculable. But it is those themes that have endured as the remembered Puritan legacy to subsequent generations of Americans, and which find their place in Cullen's acclaimed consideration of what it means to be an American Dreamer. Cullen acknowledges that the 'tension between one and many', the way 'collective fears could crush individual lives' is an ongoing dilemma for pursuers of the Dream (Cullen 32). And he recognises, particularly in his closing remarks, that endless aspiration to rise higher and do better (in Girardian terms mimetic desire) continues to drive the American Dream up to the present day:

> This emphasis—some might say mania—for self-improvement, cut loose from its original Calvinist moorings, remains a recognizable trait in the American character and is considered an indispensable means for the achievement of any American Dream. (Cullen 32)

Cullen's narrative establishes the roots of the Dream as a 'mania for self-improvement' supported by cathartic violence towards marginal victims. In my next section I will consider how the existence of the independent American nation, the state itself, became part of this imagined 'indispensable means for achievement', and acquired the numinosity of a religion, with the power to both save and elevate its devotees.

Following the Puritan settlement and expansion, the next decisive step in the evolution of the American Dream was arguably the founding of the independent American nation, and the struggles of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century to define that nation. In this section I will read another critical work on the American Dream, Andrew Delbanco's *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope*, and consider Delbanco's reading of the Dream in an era between the Puritans and the twentieth century: his central chapter on 'Nation'. I am interested in tracing the ways that Delbanco describes the nation of America itself as a kind of religious vehicle—a means of transcendence. In Girardian terms, religion is a means of escape from mimetic crisis, a provider of essential catharsis, a release valve for the pressures created by mimetic desire. But a crucial element of Delbanco's Dream-religion is desire itself. The hope of transcendence is the hope of gaining the elusive ontological object of mimetic desire, and the civic religion is a structure that is intended to stimulate and facilitate the individual's rise and eventual grasp of ontological satisfaction. Delbanco describes such a structure eventually collapsing into undifferentiation, the sign of mimetic crisis. As in Cullen's work, this American Dream is a narrative with rich Girardian and tragic resonances.

My reading of this text is, again, not an analysis of an assumed historical reality. I am reading *The Real American Dream* as an idea of America, a thoughtfully crafted narrative. Such narratives, rather than being portraits of their subject shot at a distance, I would argue are the substance of the Dream itself: a community imagining and perpetuating its identity through repetition of its

stories. When I come later to analyse my novel texts, it will be seen that those texts are participating in the same discourse, though problematising it in new—and distinctively tragic—ways.

The Real American Dream is divided into three sections: God, Nation, and Self. Delbanco argues that the first phase of American life was oriented around the Christian religion. Secondly, around the time of the Declaration of Independence, followed by the civil war, he sketches religion fading in importance and the state becoming the primary symbol of hope for transcendence. Finally, Delbanco sees a crisis occurring in the twentieth century, during which the State loses its numinous power, to be replaced with incessant and undiscriminating consumerism, as the quest for self-gratification becomes the new focus of ontological hope.

Delbanco begins his chapter on Nation with an evaluation of the place of formal religion in the nineteenth century. For Alexis De Tocqueville, the 'religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck [him]' on arrival in America in the early 1830s (Delbanco 48). However, Delbanco argues that this 'religious atmosphere' was undergoing a profound shift. Despite the increasing size and number of church congregations (47), Delbanco sides with R.W. Emerson who in the 1830s wrote that 'the Puritans in England and America found in the Christ... and in the dogmas inherited from Rome, scope for their austere piety and their longings for civil freedom. But their creed is passing away…' (38, 43).

As government prescriptions regulating forms of worship relaxed—a significant shift from the theocratic strictness of the earlier Puritan communities—'a burst of spiritual frenzy was released' in the form of alternative sects and cults, some avowedly religious, others the precursors of secular self-help creeds (Delbanco 49). Delbanco seems to share Emerson's cynical dismissal of America's religious scene as 'a carnival of crackpots' (50): Emerson addressed the graduating class of the Harvard Divinity School in 1838 with the suggestion that

Christianity was fading into a 'Mythus, as the poetic teaching of Greece and of Egypt, before' (6). But for Delbanco, what this fading 'left in its wake' was a new social problem: 'unquenched spiritual longing' (51).

What could fill this longing? Delbanco quotes Walt Whitman 'summ[ing] up the age' as an era in which 'the priest departs, the divine literatus comes', and points to Whitman's love of 'The United States themselves… the greatest poem' as prophetic of the new religion of patriotism (Delbanco 52). But how, Delbanco asks, can a political structure, an idea of nationhood, 'deliver the saving power of religion' (52)?

From a Girardian point of view, the saving power of religion is salvation from mimetic desire, crisis and violence through either revelation of individual guilt and renunciation of violence, or creation and performance of scapegoat-myths. If, in Delbanco's narrative, neither of these salvifics were prominent in the form of official religion, one might expect them to be present in other forms—which is precisely what Delbanco finds, a 'sacralization of the state' (Delbanco 92):

> Like any religion, it had a martyrology (revolutionary heroes such as Nathan Hale) and a demonology (Benedict Arnold, Aaron Burr)… it acquired a whole mythology of figures half-real and half-imagined—Leatherstocking, Davy Crockett, Brother Jonathan, Yankee Doodle… (Delbanco 53)

From the Puritans, nineteenth century Americans had inherited a sense of divine purpose, 'the idea that God had struck in America the spark that would ignite a world-purifying fire' (Delbanco 57). The vehicle of this cathartic purification here becomes the state itself, which casts out poisonous intruders, beatifies fallen heroes, and provides community cohesion to its devout members. Delbanco declares that this 'new symbolic system' is primarily about equality,

a 'universal priesthood' (59). I would argue that his narrative is equally a description of a symbolic system imbued with the community-saving power of myth and catharsis. In any case, I agree with Delbanco that this new order is the means for his American Dream to provide 'transcendence', 'transferring to the civil sphere' the religious power to save and unite (59).

Of course, such power is particularly necessary to the survival of a community built on the precept of equal opportunity, a nonaristocratic society in which internal mediation is the status quo. As Delbanco notes, quoting Tocqueville,

> … in America master and servant 'perceive no deep-seated difference between them, … Knowing that with a small turn of fortune's wheel they may exchange places, the master sees his former self in the servant, and the servant sees his future in the master'. (Delbanco 61)

In Girardian terms, such fluidity of status is a catalyst for mimetic crisis. Whether this fluidity exists beyond the realm of imagination is entirely irrelevant—what matters is not the historical reality, but what the subjects (individually or collectively) conceive it to be. The belief in a well-oiled 'wheel of fortune', the imagined possibility of rising to the level of the mediator, is all that is required for internal mediation.

Such a community needs a potent myth-machine. Delbanco suggests that 'what we now think of as classic American literature was one means by which this mythology was created and sustained' (Delbanco 53), and that it was 'not until the 1850s' (54) that America produced its definitive writers such as Whitman and Melville, writing the Scripture of the new civic religion. Delbanco's remarks on *Moby Dick* are indicative of the centrality of sacrifice in the American myth: 'like America itself, the Pequod is a world-conquering ship… Allegorized in the Pequod

was the dirty secret of the new national religion—the fact that the ebullient democracy was also a killing machine' (68).

From a Girardian point of view, the visibility of violence in *Moby Dick* is a 'novelistic' feature, a suggestion that the sacrificial violence at the heart of the nation is only nominally concealed by ritual and myth, visible to those who look with 'novelistic' eyes. This sacrifice was, of course, primarily the sacrifice of African American slaves, upon whose bodies the nation was built. Delbanco describes the precariousness of the civic religion that could not 'force these savageries into view' (Delbanco 69): in Girardian terms, to become aware of victimisation destroys the myth and renders it sterile. But in Delbanco's telling, this growing awareness takes the form of another tragic narrative, as the American Dream, matryoshka-doll-like, discards the shell of one myth and emerges clothed in another. Delbanco describes the second phase of the civic religion as a classic cleansing-ritual, the hero of the story being the 'redeemer nation' (77) that expelled the taint of slavery, symbolised in the quasi-divine figure of Abraham Lincoln.

Delbanco compares the Puritan quest for religious catharsis to the way Lincoln framed the crisis of his time:

> In the 1650s the Puritan poet Michael Wigglesworth wrote in his diary, 'I feel a need of Christ's blood to wash me from [my] sins'; in the 1850s Lincoln wrote in his speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act, 'Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood of the Revolution.' (Delbanco 77)

This Lincoln is a high priest of cathartic ritual, as Delbanco points up Lincoln's rhetoric of purging and purification, such as Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, in which he declared that despite seven years and countless deaths the war would continue 'till every drop of blood

drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword' (Delbanco 47).[26] Delbanco describes Lincoln as fighting 'a holy war', in which 'religious fervor [was] transmuted into a secular crusade', and that the sacrificial violence of war was the means by which America would be 'bled free of the slave poison' (77–78). Lincoln's faith in a future, perfected Union was described by Alexander Stephens, Vice President of the Confederacy, as a notion that 'rose for him to the sublimity of religious mysticism' (78), and in Delbanco's words, 'the Union was both symbol and incarnation of transcendence' (78).

Interestingly, Delbanco reads Lincoln as a martyr-figure, who himself suffered and gave his life to purify the nation, quoting one eulogist who said 'a new era was born… and made perpetual through his death' (Delbanco 51). In this reading, Lincoln embodies the State itself, struggling, dying, and symbolically rising as the Union, a 'sacred republic' (90). Delbanco explores the 'religious element' of faith in the State, quoting William James: 'in Christian saintliness this power is always personified as God; but abstract moral ideals, civic or patriotic utopias… may also be felt as the true Lords and enlargers of our life' (qtd in 92).

Delbanco points to Lincoln as the pivot-point in this sacralisation of the State, after whose time institutional symbols of faith and salvation changed from the private and religious (churches, hospitals, charities) to the public, encouraging American citizens to look to the State as 'the source of justice, mercy, and hope' (Delbanco 92).

The Sacred State, according to Delbanco, endured until the mid-twentieth century more or less intact. Americans understood their nation and history 'within a paradigm of moral progress', a 'confidence' ('call it Hegelian, or Edwardsean') that the State was moving its people closer and closer to their utopian ideal (Delbanco 92). But for Delbanco, writing at the end of the

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[26] Of course, this is also a rhetoric of retaliation, in Giradian terms of mimetic reciprocity.

twentieth century, 'this story is in trouble in a way it has never been before' (92). While he feels the 'death' of the civic religion cannot be accurately dated, he points to 'somewhere around the moment when the reformist dream that Lyndon Johnson called the Great Society became a casualty of the Vietnam war' as 'not too far off the mark', (92) hearing the death throes in the 'eerie whine' of Jimi Hendrix's guitar at Woodstock, Hendrix's performance of 'The Star Spangled Banner' echoing with 'the sound of an erstwhile believer whose hope had been betrayed' (96). He points to the 'hyperpatriotism' of Reaganites as the desperate manoeuvres of believers in denial, and notes that both the 1960s and the 1980s, while very different in political tone, were decades that failed in loftier ideals, rejected State intervention as of any use or hope, and 'finally cooperated in installing instant gratification as the hallmark of the good life' (97).

The mid-twentieth century demystification of the State, argues Delbanco, resulted in Americans focusing on wealth and pleasure as the means to transcendence or salvation. Both desire for material and physical gains *and* passionate patriotism had been part of the American Dream for a hundred years; but now the former, not the latter, became the defining characteristic of the American subject.

The Girardian subject becomes more panicked as social structures and rituals disintegrate, as differentiation gives way to an undifferentiated free-for-all. Under such circumstances, the subject clings to the illusion of individual, innate desire, and his resentment of rivals intensifies. Delbanco quotes Theodor Adorno, to argue that 'the cost of possessive individualism' is the loss of coherent community, 'the loss of the nation itself':

> In modern culture the 'pretense of individualism... increases in proportion to the liquidation of the individual'… the modern self tries to compensate with posturing and competitive self-display as it feels itself more and more cut off from anything substantial or enduring. (Delbanco 103–104)

This 'posturing and competitive self-display' is highly reminiscent of Girard's conception of the snob in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*:

> In a universe of peers the feeble are prey to metaphysical desire and we see the triumph of modern feelings: 'envy, jealousy, and impotent hatred'… it is because the vaniteux feels the emptiness mentioned in Ecclesiastes growing inside him that he takes refuge in shallow behaviour and imitation. (Girard, *DDN* 65, 66)

Essential to Girard's concept of mimetic crisis, and to Delbanco's depiction of twentieth century America, is the manifestation of undifferentiation. Delbanco defines cultural undifferentiation as 'masscult', a term coined by American Dwight Macdonald, who in 1960 despaired while reading American Life Magazine:

> 'Nine color pages of Renoir paintings,' he wrote, are 'followed by a picture of a rollerskating horse... Just think, nine pages of Renoirs! But that roller-skating horse comes along, and the final impression is that Renoir is talented, but so is the horse.' (Delbanco 104)

Delbanco argues that in modern America 'discrimination is always a bad word', citing Lewis Lapham's remarks that 'the press draws no invidious distinctions between the... policies of the president's penis and the threat of nuclear annihilation' (Delbanco 104). Delbanco's modern American embodies undifferentiation, being 'all and nothing at the same time'. This modern self is little more than an automaton, moving in 'unconscious conformity' with all his 'interchangeable' peers in 'somnolent likemindedness' (105), driven by unconscious desire for meaningless 'trinkets and baubles' (106), or as de Tocqueville so presciently phrased it, 'an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives' (110).

Delbanco suggests that one of the most desired 'baubles' was (or is) sex; that sexual pleasure became a particular symbol of gratified desire, and further, that it acquired a religious numinosity. Americans turned 'to guiltless sexual pleasure for their last link to the feeling of transcendence' (Delbanco 102), sex becoming 'the last sacrament of the dispossessed'. In Girardian terms, the less effective the ritual, the greater frequency and intensity of the required dose—and Delbanco describes Americans of the later twentieth century 'engulfed' in a 'haze of quasi-pornographic images' which fail to provide religious catharsis or transcendence: 'the efficacy of the sacrament is in doubt' (102). Interestingly, Delbanco quotes critic Adam Kirsch saying, 'We value sexual desire so highly that we do not want it to refer beyond itself' (103). From a Girardian point of view, this may be read as refusal to admit to mimetic desire, needing to believe that the object of desire is not mediated, has no referent. But as Delbanco states, desire without referent leaves the subject with 'no way of organizing' her desire, no 'structure of meaning' (103) but hedonism.

The Girardian subject seizes one object of desire after another and is constantly deflated by inevitable disappointment. Delbanco describes the modern American as haunted by melancholy 'in the midst of abundance', having abandoned the 'old stories' of traditional religion and nationalism, and unable to find identity or salvation in the 'new' stories of masscult consumerism (Delbanco 106). He quotes Joh Dewey on this 'problem of post-nationalism': 'symbols control sentiment and thought, and the new age has no symbols' (115). Delbanco finds the 'root of… postmodern melancholy' in this failure of consumerism to provide 'narrative and symbol' which create 'meaning' (107)—in Girardian terms, such narratives are those rituals and myths that sustain differentiation. Without differentiation, Delbanco's modern American lives with an 'ache for meaning'; without catharsis, the community is in disarray, stuck in rivalry, disunited—in Delbanco's words, 'something… has snapped in… the bands that once connected us to one another' (107).

Thus modern American society may be materially comfortable for many of its inhabitants, but Delbanco argues that its citizens' deeper needs for communal identity are not being met: [27]

> From the comfort of the academy, we look at our past and are quick to say that a culture with too little freedom and too much brutality was a bad culture. But do we have the nerve to say of ourselves that a culture locked in a soul-starving present… is no culture at all? (Delbanco 111)

Delbanco's American Dream is a tragic myth that, in the twentieth century, has lost its mythical power. Salvation, through the power of the state to expel toxic influences and assist its citizens to rise to affluence, is no longer available. Desire and crisis are rife, but the old sacrifical systems are absent or ineffective. The Dream, the sustaining myth of communal triumph over intruders and individual triumph of fulfilled desires, is in doubt. This is highly relevant to my argument that the novels *The Virgin Suicides*, *The Ice Storm* and *Revolutionary Road*, produced in the mid-twentieth century, are engaging with that fading myth, revisiting its tropes of desire, crisis and catharsis, but also engaging with its failure, and presenting a problematic version of the promised transcendence of the Dream.

This twentieth century problem of 'no culture at all'—that is, no myth, no differentiation, no 'narrative and symbol' to maintain communal identity—is the focus of my next chosen text.

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[27] Delbanco suggests that the cultural 'discordance' of the late twentieth century may be a transitional phase on the way to another form of civic religion. Writing in 1998, Delbanco posited that 'some new cult or Reich may be advancing upon us to fill the yearning for something grand, something stirring' (116). The revived nationalism following 9/11 and the tenor of American public discourse in the years since is outside the scope of this thesis, but a fascinating development in the story of America's civic religion.

2.2. Death of a Salesman: Troubling Tragedy

A column in the *New York Herald* in 1882 argued that modern America had no need of tragedy, since the 'overmastering fates' and 'gods' of the classical era had been superseded by the capable American who 'pays his way through the world' (qtd in Foley 160). By contrast, the founders of the Chicago Little Theatre in 1912 declared that theatres were desperately necessary as 'temples…in which performances served as rituals that regenerated social life' (62). Specifically, they held up Greek tragedy as a means of performing rituals that would take the place of religion and 'unify social groups in a democracy' (75). Helene Foley argues that these quasi-cathartic ambitions were blunted by the preference of American audiences to 'not look at terrible truths' but rather continue to believe in the American Dream of 'reward' for the pursuit of objects of desire (160). Greek tragedy therefore was reimagined and restaged to respond to 'national aspirations', 'an American desire to modify tragic plots', that—in Girardian terms—scapegoated the plays themselves as exotically 'other', from a time and place without relevance to the imagined modern American utopia (229).[28] Yet the resonances between tragic themes and American life remained, and were explored by playwrights like Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller—who created what has become arguably the definitive American tragedy, *Death of a Salesman.*

Miller consciously evolved the tragic tradition, perhaps most declaredly in his 1967 essay 'Tragedy and the Common Man', in which he reflects on the nature of tragic drama and argues for the validity of a tragic hero taken from the *hoi polloi*. Miller wrote the essay nearly 20 years

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[28] According to Foley, the number of productions of Greek tragedies in the USA went up 350 percent between 1895-1905, and in 1938 over 400 performances in 143 institutions in 41 states have been recorded. *Antigone*, *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, and *Alcestis* were the most frequently presented: the plots suggest an individual freedom and 'release from fatality' that Foley suggests were popular with American audiences (Foley 33–37).

after the play's debut, which catalysed a major cultural conversation about tragedy and the American Dream that is still going on.

The play premiered on Broadway in February 1949, running for 742 performances, and winning the 1949 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the Tony Award for Best Play. It was revived on Broadway in 1975, 1984, 1999, and 2012, winning multiple awards with every new staging. It has been adapted for television six times—in 1966 approximately 17 million viewers watched the CBS production (Bloom 9). Google Books lists nearly 300 print editions of the play, many of which include introductions affirming the play's cultural significance—such as the latest Bloomsbury edition in which Enoch Brater describes Willy's stage entrance as among the 'most famous stage entrances in twentieth century drama'. In 1998, the *Michigan Quarterly Review* celebrated the play's upcoming fiftieth anniversary with a special issue, declaring that *Salesman* 'tower[s] over the modern American theater' (V. Lawrence 9). In it, twenty eminent American playwrights, including Edward Albee, Horton Foote, John Guare, Adrienne Kennedy, Tony Kushner, Joyce Carol Oates, Neil Simon, and Lanford Wilson, discuss the 'impact of *Death of a Salesman*' on their work—Oates declaring that 'Willy Loman has become our quintessential American tragic hero, our domestic Lear' (Oates 133).

In this chapter I will analyse *Death of a Salesman* as a text that explicitly brings the notion of the American Dream together with that of tragedy. In Harold Bloom's words, 'the American Dream functions almost like a character in [the play]' (Bloom 16): like James Truslow Adams before him, as Cullen and Delbaco would afterwards do also, Miller is writing a deliberate analysis and critique of the concept of the Dream. The difference is that Miller is using the tragic genre to do so. This is highly significant to my contention that the Dream is itself a kind of tragic myth, and that criticism of the Dream may take the form of undermining its mythical foundations of mimetic desire and sacrificial catharsis. I will therefore consider the ways in

which *Salesman* participates in and problematises the traditional features of tragedy, especially in the way it treats the guilt of the tragic victim. While the play in many ways blames American society for its deathly denouement, and acquits Willy Loman, this blame is not entire. Before returning to this crucial point, I will explore the ways in which Miller's 'tragedy of the common man' sets up its central conflict: the frustrating and irresolvable differences between the protagonist's reality and the promise of the American Dream.

While the play is full of references to American places and spaces—New York city, Boston, commuter trains to New Haven, cowboys in the West, and so on—there are only a few mentions of the larger ideal of America as a place where dreams come true. Those few mentions, however, are telling. In the first scene, Willy describes America as 'the greatest country in the world' (Miller, *Salesman* 8), and later he raves with near-religious fervour about 'the wonder, the wonder of this country', which in Willy's mind is a promised land in which 'a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being *liked*!' (62 emphasis original). Willy is contrasting his imagined USA with other places in which money is connected to commodities, in which diamonds are the result of mechanical effort (mining) or profits from trade (Alaskan commercial forestry). In the latter case, Willy is wilfully ignoring the fact that Alaska is part of the USA because it is not part of *his* America, the land in which success is a result of being popular, in which status itself is the cause of success. Willy is committed to the ideal of American society as an environment in which a man ascends to fame and fortune simply because he is the right kind of man: 'Be liked and you will never want' (21).

Of course, this means he has to think of *himself* as being the right kind of man. Much of the pathos of the play is derived from Willy's oscillations between keeping up the fantasy, and admitting the truth. He boasts to his family, 'they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people' (Miller, *Salesman* 20), then moments later confides to Linda

that 'people don't seem to take to me… I know it when I walk in. They seem to laugh at me… they just pass me by' (24). But these moments of discouragement are the exception because Willy is deeply invested in his aspirational optimism. 'The greatest things can happen!' he exalts (32), and Linda reminds the boys that her husband needs constant hope that 'there's still a possibility for better things' (40). Just like Girard's description of the endlessly-hopeful mimetic subject, Willy is 'never so happy as when he's looking forward to something!' (76), and in his nostalgia for the past he remembers a time when there was 'always some kind of good news coming up, always something nice coming up ahead' (94). However, as I stated in Chapter 1, the Girardian subject is in a precarious relationship with hope. Each time he acquires the object that was supposed to confer satisfaction and ontological certainty, it fails to satisfy, and he must jump to another 'slippery stone' on the metaphorical river-crossing of imagined progress.

Willy makes a speech, ostensibly about the refrigerator, which takes on a deep irony when considered from this Girardian perspective. 'Once in my life I would like to own something outright before it's broken!' he shouts (Miller, *Salesman* 51). Willy conflates material wealth with inherent ontological value, as when he notes that a couple with their own tennis court 'must be fine people' (66). Linda, too, is susceptible to belief in objects-as-identity, as when she imparts transformative powers to Biff's blue suit: 'He could be a—anything in that suit!' (50). Unfortunately, the imagined bliss of owning transformative objects will always elude the Girardian subject because the objects do not actually possess such powers. Willy discovers this during his breakdown as he is about to make the final payment on his mortgage: owning the house doesn't measure up to his fantasies. There are no married sons to take it over, or visit with their children. Willy describes being in constant debt on depreciating goods as being 'in a race with the junkyard' (51), but even the thing that appreciates in monetary value, his house, is cast aside as 'junk' because it fails to satisfy.

Salesman is particularly transparent about the mimetic nature of Willy's dreams and desires. He has a few model-figures who loom very large in his life. He describes how his decision to be a salesman was built upon his admiration for a successful salesman named Dave Singleman. Singleman does not appear in the play, but hovers behind all of Willy's ambition—to be like that first model, rich, successful, 'remembered and loved' (Miller, *Salesman* 58). In order to follow his dream of being like Singleman, Willy abandons a plan to seek out his father (another model), and transfers his attachment to his imagined Model Salesman. He also admires and envies other successful salesmen, such as his former boss 'Old Man Wagner' whom he describes as 'a prince… a masterful man' (6). Wagner's son, Howard, is a model-figure of both envy and scorn: when Howard praises his latest acquisition, a dictation machine, Willy jumps to affirm 'I'm definitely going to get one' (56); but when Howard rejects him, Willy flies into a resentful rage reminiscent of that of Girard's Stendhalian snob in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*:

> The doors of the salons where he wishes to be received are closed to him… [he is] driven to worship, to hate, to collapse sobbing at the feet of his mediator, to send him incoherent messages full of insults mixed with endearments. (Girard, *DDN* 57)

Willy treats his neighbour Charley in a similar way, fawning to him one moment and throwing insults at him the next. The last straw is when Charley offers Willy a job, clearly as an unmerited favour. For Willy, accepting the job means accepting that Charley has ascended higher on the status-ladder—instead he becomes furious, asking 'Who the hell do you think you are, better than everybody else?' (Miller, *Salesman* 64). The idea that his peer has become his superior is counter to all of Willy's snobbish fantasies. Charley recognises that this anger comes from jealousy, and can't understand why Willy's pride is more important to him than the practical matter of paying his bills, calling him 'jealous' and 'a damned fool' (64).

Ironically, Willy is in love with the American Dream's promise of universal access to success, but doesn't want to share it with anybody else. I have previously discussed the American Dream's relationship with the notion of equality, and Girard's observations about democratic conditions as a breeding ground for rivalry. Willy cannot abide the thought that his peers and neighbours are striving for the same things he wants, and he hates having more people move into his suburb: 'There's more people! That's what's ruining this country! The competition is maddening!' (Miller, *Salesman* 9). As a typical Girardian subject, wracked with insecurity about his own merits while desperately believing in his potential to achieve transcendence, the prospect of more rivals is unbearable.

Perhaps the most significant model for Willy is his brother Ben, who appears throughout the play in memory scenes, and as a spectre of Willy's fevered mind. To Willy, Ben is literally 'success incarnate!' who knows 'the answers'—he is the enviable possessor of the ontological secret, that ultimate object which the Girardian model has attained (Miller, *Salesman* 27). The Ben of the play is, of course, Ben as Willy sees him, a perfect model free of ontological insecurity: 'He is utterly certain of his destiny' (30). Willy, by contrast, is hounded by the sense of personal insufficiency that Girard describes as 'bitter and solitary… the promise remains true for Others' while the subject 'believes that he alone is excluded from the divine inheritance' (Girard, *DDN* 56). Willy implores Ben to let him into the secret knowledge that unlocks the doors of success: 'I've been waiting for you so long! What's the answer?', 'hanging on' to Ben's words (Miller, *Salesman* 36), desperately hoping to be admitted entrance. Later, Willy implores Bernard in the same way, pitifully 'small and alone', petitioning Bernard to tell him, 'What—what's the secret? (66).

Ben's eligibility as a model is presented as a mini-narrative designed to provoke envy, a few lines he repeats like a push-button toy: 'when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I

walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!' (Miller, *Salesman* 36). Ben is also a stand-in for Willy's father, whose absence Willy feels as a loss of the model to imitate. He hopes that Ben will be able to be the model he needs to become a fully-fledged person, since 'Dad left when I was such a baby and… I still feel—kind of temporary about myself (36).

Willy in turn is a model to his sons, Biff and Happy. It is a position he cherishes, and Linda reinforces his status as their model, reminding Willy of how much Biff 'admires' and 'idolizes' him (Miller, *Salesman* 25). Happy as a boy was constantly seeking Willy's approval, depicted in the play as a pathetic repetition of the line, 'I'm losing weight, you notice, Pop?', which later turns into repetition of the promise 'I'm gonna get married' (18, 28) as he vainly attempts to get Willy's attention and praise. But Willy's focus is on Biff. He basks in his sons' admiration, which confirms him in his own fantasy of himself as a successful man, even though he regularly lies to them about his success. Willy also has a kind of vicarious interest in Biff, as if Biff will be his representative on the playing field of life and achieve the kind of status that he himself cannot—to become 'a young god' (49). *Salesman* thus presents almost all of Willy's relationships as based upon mimesis, envy, rivalry, and the mimetic ideal of acquiring ontological satisfaction.

Biff and Happy are likewise affected by the mimetic ideals that Willy has taught them, and they both struggle with living up to those ideals. Biff has fled the city after 'six or seven years…trying to work myself up', and deciding that the mimetic competition of 'always to have to get ahead of the next fella' is a 'measly manner of existence' (Miller, *Salesman* 12). But he cannot be content in his farm work because the mimetic model of the Successful Man haunts him—an image of the kind of man his father always told him he should, and would, become. He is plagued by a repeated feeling that he's 'not gettin' anywhere!' (12), and he tries to have it both ways by imagining being a ranch owner, which would satisfy his internal requirement for status without sacrificing his love of farming: 'I could do the work I like and still be something'

(16). Torn between what he genuinely enjoys, and what he has been taught to want by his models, Biff is confused about his own desires: 'I don't know—what I'm supposed to want' (12).

Happy, too, struggles with life on the mimetic ladder. His nearest career model is the merchandise manager, whose place Happy hopes to fill one day. But he admits to Biff that he already knows that reaching this goal won't satisfy him, since he has seen the same 'slippery stone' effect working on the current merchandise manager, who continually builds new houses which he 'can't enjoy… once [they're] finished' (Miller, *Salesman* 13). Happy is likewise perplexed about his own desires, torn between 'I don't know what the hell I'm working for' and 'it's what I always wanted' (13). Happy is momentarily swept up in Biff's fantasy of the two of them ranching together, but mimetic envy pulls him back:

> HAPPY: The only thing is—what can you make out there?
>
> BIFF: But look at your friend. Builds an estate and then hasn't the peace of mind to live in it.
>
> HAPPY: Yeah, but when he walks into the store the waves part in front of him … I gotta show some of those pompous, self-important executives over there that Hap Loman can make the grade. I want to walk into the store the way he walks in. (Miller, *Salesman* 15)

In Girardian terms, mimetic competition is the problem. Happy is driven by envy of the executives, sees them as rivals, and simultaneously resents them, mocks them, and wants to be one of them. Happy worries that he has 'an overdeveloped sense of competition', and dreams of a life without 'some smart cooky gettin' up ahead of you!' (Miller, *Salesman* 16, 36). Happy's way of coping with his insecurity is to pursue sexual success with women, disavowing the

domestic values and ideals of his father. When witnessing Willy's failure becomes too uncomfortable, Happy tries to slip out of the relationship altogether, telling the women in the bar that Willy is 'not my father. He's just a guy' (85). This disavowal does not last, however, and Happy slips back into wanting Willy's approval: 'I'm getting married, Pop, don't forget it… I'm gonna run that department before the year is up' (99).

Biff, by contrast, comes to a point of truly separating himself from Willy's mimetic Dream. Ultimately frustrated by trying to be something, and someone, he is not, Biff gives up striving: 'I don't care what they think! … we don't belong in this nuthouse of a city!' (Miller, *Salesman* 43). Biff's first rift with Willy was when he discovered his father's infidelity, and his idolised model-father-figure was destroyed—Bernard describes Biff, on returning home from that discovery, having 'given up his life' (68). But Biff has been haunted by the remnants of that mimetic relationship, feeling guilty for not following in his father's footsteps, even if those footsteps were a fantasy. It is not until the final day of Willy's life that Biff faces the truth that they have been 'talking in a dream for fifteen years'; he wants to get out of the Dream and escape the mimetic system of aspiring to be someone else. Repeatedly he begs his father for his release, 'will you let me out of it, will you just let me out of it! … Will you let me go, for Christ's sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?' (79, 99). Biff recognises that the Dream, and the dilemma, are ontological: he is struggling to accept who and what he is. His climactic argument with his father turns on this ontological essence:

> Dad, you're never going to see what I am … Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? … when all I want is out there [if] I say I know who I am! Why can't I say that, Willy? … No, you're going to hear the truth—what you are and what I am!' (Miller, *Salesman* 96, 97, 98)

Willy never understands what Biff is trying to tell him. As he plans to take his own life, he delights in the belief that his suicide will be the means of elevating both himself and Biff to the identities of his dreams. He imagines his funeral proving his worth and status, as mourners flock to attend, and Biff will 'see with his eyes once and for all. He'll see what I am, Ben! … he'll worship me for it! (Miller, *Salesman* 94). Irreparably stuck in his system of mimetic envy and competition, Willy is elated by the hope that his life insurance payout will put Biff 'ahead of Bernard again!' (101), and in this frame of mind he runs offstage to his death.

Death of a Salesman does not fit obviously into Girard's typical description of tragedy: while there is ample depiction of mimetic desire, there is little depiction of a community in mimetic crisis (with all its symbolic symptoms) and in need of scapegoat-relief. However, I would argue that the depiction of mimetic desire, the whole social context of the American Dream and its effect on Willy Loman, is itself a depiction of a crisis. We see that crisis play out not in a troubled community but in the troubled mind of one man. The tragic imperative to catharsis, its resolution gained by blaming the scapegoat for his own demise, is held in tension with the play's profound critique of the American Dream as a system that robs Willy of his due sense of worth and dignity. For this reason, I suggest that *Death of a Salesman* is a truly Girardian modern tragedy, which explores the tension between the sacrificial and Scriptural narrative perspectives.

Linda's key speech in *Death of a Salesman,* I would argue, is the passage early in Act 1 in which she frames Willy's breakdown not only for her boys' eyes, but for the audience, essentially defining the play's purpose and meaning:

> He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person. (Miller, *Salesman* 39)

This compassionate perspective is reinforced by Charley, who in the final act gives another speech that seems particularly directed at the audience, as he asserts repeatedly that we shouldn't 'blame him … Nobody dast blame this man… Nobody dast blame this man' (Miller, *Salesman* 103). But Biff's final words remind us of the complexity of culpability here: Willy was wilfully, furiously attached to his fantasies, following their imperatives at any cost: 'He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong. … He never knew who he was' (103). So Willy is at fault, but we also see that this fault is not of his own making. He was caught up in a Dream larger than himself. The final scene reminds us of this as we see Happy, who has learned nothing from his father's downfall, and is himself still caught up in the mimetic pursuit of beating rivals and attaining identity through success:

> I'm staying right in this city, and I'm gonna beat this racket! … He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have—to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him. (Miller, *Salesman* 104)

Biff sees, with the audience, that it is 'hopeless' to try and help Happy, though he himself has found ontological peace 'I know who I am, kid.' (Miller, *Salesman* 104). The contrast between Biff's relationship to the mimetic Dream (finally 'let out of it') and Happy (still in it) in those closing moments is finally pointed up in Linda's ironic words that close the play: 'We're free and clear… free… free…' (104).

Girard reads classical Greek tragedies as depicting the scapegoat as worthy of expulsion or death because he is guilty of some crime or irremediable error— what Aristotle called *hamartia*—such as Oedipus's crimes of murder and incest. However, for Girard, the scapegoat's guilt is a spurious misdirection because even if, according to the mythical text, he is guilty of whatever he is accused of, in a larger sense the tragedy is just repeating the 'romantic lie' of ritual and myth, that contagious crises are caused by a single polluting intruder, rather than by

mimetic effects. By contrast, the narratives of Judeo-Christian Scripture and all 'analogous' narratives (Girard, *BTE* 25) depict the scapegoat as the innocent victim of a capricious community. In a similar way, Miller uses the tragic model in order to subvert it. His play is an anti-myth, the rags-to-riches formula in reverse so that it becomes 'the story of a failure in terms of success, or better, the story of the failure of the success myth' (Porter 131 qtd in (Bloom 16).

In Chapter 1 I outlined Girard's claims that modern Western society is the result of a 'complex interaction' between the insight of Biblical narratives and the sacrificial impulses of communities in crisis. The influence of Judeo-Christian Scriptural narratives, in Girard's view, acts on the modern Western imagination as a 'force of disruption' to the scapegoat-mechanism. In Chapter 2's analysis of Cullen's *The American Dream* and Delbanco's *The American Dream*, I argued that those texts are reflecting upon, and contributing to, a cultural preoccupation with mimetic desire and rivalry and the symptoms of crisis that appear in ritual and myth, though without being named as such. I am therefore interested in whether *Death of a Salesman*, this seminal American tragedy, also depicts mimetic desire and rivalry, and whether the text presents its scapegoat as guilty of *hamartia* or as an innocent victim.

Several critics have remarked on the play's ambiguity regarding Willy Loman's guilt or innocence. Sister M. Bettina suggests that the question of Willy's guilt has traditionally turned on his obliviousness—since he never realises that his own misplaced dreams have been the major cause of his downfall, he is presented as responsible (Bettina 409). However, she also acknowledges that the play makes a strong case for the guilt of American society, and the ideals of the American dream that have driven Willy away from his natural talents and into a life in which he is destined to be a failure (411). She argues that the play achieves a balance between betraying Willy as a 'pathetic victim of American society' and assigning 'personal responsibility'

for his demise by its treatment of this obliviousness: Willy attains the stature of a tragic hero even though he never becomes aware of his own delusions and denial (411). In Aristotelian terms, the hero's *anagnorisis* is a climactic moment, as the tragic victim becomes aware of his fatal error, and accepts the inevitability of his deserved end. But Bettina argues that 'audience consciousness' is the aim of tragedy, and while tragic figures have traditionally been 'more or less poetically articulate about their destinies, desires, and mistakes' (411), this hero-awareness is not an end in itself but simply a means of making the audience aware of the forces at work in sending the hero to his inexorable fate. She argues that Willy's 'struggle against self-knowledge' is so blatant that the audience becomes aware of what Willy is trying to suppress, and pities him as victim of both his own delusions *and* the social imaginary that first imposed them upon him (411). Willy never has an anagnoretic moment, which is not only symptomatic of his general malaise, but indicative of the ways in which *Salesman* bears witness to tragedy as an evolving genre. Miller utilises the concept of anagnoresis in reverse, by its absence, to make the audience (rather than the hero) reflect upon causes and culpability.

By contrast, Joseph Hynes argues that *Death Of A Salesman* fails as a tragedy, and Willy fails as a tragic protagonist precisely because of the final ambiguity about his guilt and especially Willy's lasting ignorance, arguing that 'self-awareness is basic to tragedy' (Hynes 577). He focuses on Charley's admittedly incongruous change of attitude in the Requiem: after all his clear-headedness and frustrated determination to make Willy see reality, Charley turns around and becomes an advocate for Willy's stubborn clinging to his fantasies. His insistence that 'nobody dast blame this man', and his poetic rhapsody about the salesman as a dreamer 'leaves the play mired in imprecision', according to Hynes (576). He rejects this ending as 'sheer sentimentality … [a] Hallmark-card flourish at the curtain' that is at odds with the previous Acts' indictment of Willy Loman, turning the play from a potentially instructive morality tale into nothing but 'ultimate confusion' (575).

Stephen Lawrence goes so far as to describe the play's treatment of 'the problem of responsibility' as a 'schizophrenic vacillation' (S. A. Lawrence 547) between blaming Willy, and blaming American society and its obsession with material success:

> If Willy is responsible for his own downfall, what are we to make of all the suggestions of the sick and distorted society? If on the other hand society is responsible for placing the seeds of corruption and misplaced values in Willy, what are we to make of the success of people like Charlie [sic] and his son Bernard [who are] sensible enough to see what is wrong with the American success myth…? (S. A. Lawrence 547)

However, in contrast to Hynes's dismissal of the play, Lawrence's essay is an attempt to bring these two perspectives together and find a sense in which blame may be shared between society and Willy in a 'meaningful ambiguity' (S. A. Lawrence 548). For Lawrence, this midway point is found by acknowledging the positive aspects of Willy's dream, especially his love for his sons, which is good in itself, although he remains partially culpable for not recognising that society will not reward him or his sons simply for being loved by one another. This is a persuasive argument but ultimately it does not matter for my purposes how the play manages to present Willy as partially guilty and partially innocent, only that it *does* do so. In doing so it moves away from the persecutor-text pattern of classical tragedy, and into that space of 'complex interaction' between the sacrificial and the Scriptural. In fact, Arthur Miller went to some effort to define *Death of a Salesman* as a victim-text in his essay 'Tragedy and the Common Man': he states that the destruction of the hero reveals 'a wrong or an evil *in his environment.'* (Miller, "Tragedy" 145 my emphasis). Likewise Elia Kazan, who directed the hugely successful Broadway production of *Salesman* in 1949–50, gave his opinion on the purpose of modern American drama: 'to throw light' on the 'violent and desperate actions' of people trapped by the 'terrific schism in our society between the way we pretend to live and the way we really live'

(Kazan, Schechner, and Hoffman 81). The tragic stage, for Kazan, was the place where the truth could be told about the victims of the American Dream. Miller clearly did not write Willy Loman as an utterly pure, Christlike scapegoat figure *á la* Shakespeare's Cordelia; there is plenty about him to attract justified frustration, blame, even contempt. But in *Salesman* Miller presents us with a tragedy that is troubled about guilt and blame, and which leaves us reflecting less on the *hamartia* of the tragic protagonist and more on those evils in his environment that destroyed him.

The above scholars note that Willy's self-consciousness, or lack thereof, is important to the tragic effect in *Salesman*, and Bettina suggests that what really matters is 'audience-consciousness'. In Chapter 1 I outlined the notion, introduced by Terry Eagleton and developed more fully by Thomas Cousineau, that the modern novel may have its own self-consciousness that it offers to the reader, in the sense that the reader is assumed to be aware of the text as a fictional construction. I suggest that Miller ventured towards such gestures to 'audience-consciousness' with the nonrealist devices in *Salesman*, people and events portrayed as they exist in Willy's fantasy-addled mind, making him a kind of unreliable narrator. The novel form, I will argue, allows Eugenides, Moody and Yates even more capacity to present 'genuine demystification'—in Cousineau's terms, to make scapegoating the subject *of* fiction rather than a structural element within it, facilitating 'the critical movement from the mythical to the non-mythical representation of the scapegoat' (*Ritual Unbound* 5).

3. The Virgin Suicides: Unravelling Fantasies

In this chapter I will consider Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *The Virgin Suicides* as a modern American tragedy, looking for the recurring themes I have identified in texts about the American Dream, and which Girard has identified as the preoccupations of sacrificial ritual and myth. I will identify the growing threat of crisis in the novel and the eventual act of sacrificial violence, following the pattern of scapegoat-myth, and then consider the ways the novel treats the question of the girls' guilt or innocence, in the context of Girard's remarks about the influence of Judeo-Christian Scripture on the modern Western imagination.

Existing critical material on *The Virgin Suicides* is minimal: there are a few scholarly articles on the novel, and a couple more on Sofia Coppola's film adaptation of the text—one of which, despite not mentioning the novel, offers the evocative suggestion that the story 'concerns itself... with the subjective phenomenon of longing' (Hoskin 214). Debra Shostak reads the novel itself and goes further, describing the novel as an 'inquiry into desire' that becomes mythical, according to Bataillian theory of eroticism and its relationship to death:

> …because eroticism dissolves the separateness of beings, it finds an intimate analogue in violent sacrifice, in which 'the victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals,' a process Bataille names as 'sacredness'. (Shostak 821)

Shostak comes close to the possibility of a Girardian reading of the novel, even citing Girard in a footnote, but only as a source of 'critique of Bataille' (Shostak 832) . She does not consider the applicability of Girardian theory to the text— an oversight I propose to correct here.

The Virgin Suicides begins in Detroit, June 1972, with the attempted suicide of thirteen-year-old Cecelia Lisbon. Her subsequent death, and the suicides of her four sisters one year later, serve

as a focal point for their neighbours' anxieties about the deterioration of American society. 'In telling a little bit of Detroit history,' said author Jeffery Eugenides of the novel, 'I was telling the story of the nation as a whole' (in Womack and Mallory-Kani 165). The novel is set in an enclave of suburbia, where a sense of dissatisfaction with the promise of the American Dream is growing. A neighbour with Communist sympathies lectures the boys about 'the ravages of competition' (Eugenides 231). The community have been driven by mimetic desire for the objects of the Dream—a house in the suburbs, a new Cadillac, a happy American family—but are now finding that these objects elude them or fail to satisfy.

In the early 1970s, Detroit was suffering the decline of its manufacturing industry, the adolescent boys who narrate the novel describing their situation as 'the misfortune of living in a dying empire' (Eugenides 91). The American Dream was not delivering on its promise of security and happiness—in fact, as the narrators tell us,

> Owing to extensive layoffs at the automotive plants, hardly a day passed without some despairing soul sinking beneath the tide of the recession, men found in garages with cars running, or twisted in the shower, still wearing work clothes. (Eugenides 93)

Frustrated by hard economic times, the desire-driven, Dream-soaked folks of suburban Detroit are getting nowhere fast. Lisa Kirby has described the community of *The Virgin Suicides* as 'one that has not been able to escape the inevitable corruption and failure of the American Dream' (Kirby 51). The suburbanites have been relying on the promise of the American dream but are now disappointed. Kenneth Millard notes that 1970s Detroit saw a 'mass exodus' of affluent families not only from the city but from suburbia, as families migrated from the 'rust belt' to places like Florida that promised fertile new opportunities. Having once deserted the city 'to escape its rot' (Millard 245), the community of *The Virgin Suicides* now watches helplessly as 'our

last great automotive mansion was razed to put up a subdivision' (Eugenides 245), and they realise that their suburb 'can no longer even support the illusion of Success' (Kirby 51).

This atmosphere of decay, of dreams turning to dust, is reflected in the physical environment of the neighbourhood. The local lake seethes with a swampy foam of algae, 'the rotting smell pervading the air' (Eugenides 235). Great clouds of fish-flies choke the sky, 'rising in clouds from the algae in the polluted lake, they blacken windows, coat cars and streetlamps' (4), 'blotting out stars on our flags' (56). The American flag, that symbol of the Dream, is being 'blotted out'.

Girard makes lengthy observations about mimetic doubles, the 'undifferentiated reciprocity' in which individual identity is weakened in the imitative process (Girard, "Mimesis" 10), and at the crisis point breaks down until everyone is the 'twin' of everyone else: 'all the doubles are identical [and] any one can at any given moment become the double of all the others' (Girard, *VS* 89). Mimetic crisis is typified by this 'universal spread of "doubles," the complete effacement of differences' (89). It is therefore significant that the novel is narrated by a collective 'we': '*we* always watched the Lisbon girls', dreaming of them in '*our* bathroom fantasies' (Eugenides 24, 237 emphasis mine). Even their most intimate bodily experiences are not individual, but collective and mutual, as in their group orgy of kissing one another using Lux's brand of lipstick so as to taste her imagined lips; in their drunken caresses at a neighbourhood party with girls who 'kissed us' (228); even when they (in the novel's present, as middle-aged men) undertake regular testicular self-examinations, exploring 'our most private pouch', where 'we never realized how many bumps we had until we went looking' (164). The first-personal pronoun is entirely absent: the narrators are a homogenous mass, a single entity. The boys' parents are likewise a group of mimetic Dreamers, their homes built and decorated

with 'bland uniformity' (237). There is a palpable lack of individual identity between families and their homes, thinly veiled beneath 'the ruses of differentiated architectural styles to make us feel unique' (237).

Such undifferentiation is the manifestation of mimetic crisis (Girard, *VS* 52–60), and Girard notes that in myth, undifferentiation is not only depicted as occurring between people, but manifests on a large scale in the form of environmental and temporal catastrophe. Such manifestations are highly visible in *The Virgin Suicides,* as in the early confusion of night and day, as 'the sky grew darker' and 'light abandoned the daytime' until the narrators find themselves adrift without a clear distinction between the hours, 'always moving in a timeless murk' (Eugenides 12). In a classroom a hanging mobile comes down and the planets tumble into apocalyptic disorder: 'the fallen globes sat in the corner like the final trash heap of the universe, Mars embedded in Earth, Jupiter cracked in half, Saturn's rings slicing poor Neptune...' (156).

According to Girard, these symptoms of crisis are frequent in ancient myth, in which 'day and night are confused' and the planets stray from their proper place, undistinguished from one another, and clashing in conflict actually break one another (Girard, *SG* 30), just as in Eugenides' description above. Girard also notes the frequency of mythical references to 'a loss of difference between the living and the dead', a terrifying absence of barriers between two properly 'separate realms' (Girard, *VS* 290). In *The Virgin Suicides*, precisely these images of horror create a sense that the community is on the brink of collapse into total undifferentiation, of falling into a nightmare. The difference between the dead and the living is destabilised, as the cemetery workers are on strike, and dead 'bodies [are] piling up' (Eugenides 12) on the wrong side of the grave; in the graveyard a sabotaged sprinkler system results in 'a trail of deep footprints [which]… made it appear the dead were walking around at night' (34).

The time is out of joint. Calamity is imminent. This is mimetic crisis.

Girard states that mimetic crisis is by its nature contagious, and that scapegoat-myths often employ the language of contagion as a metaphor for the infectiousness of mimetic desire: 'the essential... concern here is ritual impurity... impurity is contagious... contamination is a terrible thing... If the sacrificial catharsis actually succeeds... some kind of infection is in fact being checked' (Girard, *VS* 28, 29, 31; See also Girard, "Mimesis" 13).

Cecelia's suicide is seen by the community as a sign of a 'national crisis' (Eugenides 34) of violent deaths, kindling a community-wide fear of worse to come, and the language of contagion is explicitly used here. The parents of the neighbourhood worry about 'contagious suicide' (158), imagining Cecelia's act as the release of a pollutant, a dangerous agent that will turn their suburb's remaining inhabitants from healthy individuals into 'feverish creatures, exhaling soupy breath, succumbing day by day … Cooking in the broth of her own blood, Cecelia had released an airborne virus… Black tendrils of smoke had crept under their doors…' (158).

This language of contagion is revisited later in the novel, as the narrators bemoan what they see as the catalyst event for the ensuing crisis: 'Cecilia had slit her wrists, spreading the poison in the air' (Eugenides 227). Girard writes specifically about the significance of death in ritual and myth:

> With death a contagious sort of violence is let loose on the community, and the living must take steps to protect themselves against it. So they quarantine death, creating a cordon sanitaire all around it. Above all, they have recourse to funeral rites, which (like all other rites) are dedicated to the purgation and expulsion of maleficent violence. (Girard, *VS* 290)

Unfortunately, due to the cemetery workers strike, Cecelia's funeral is a disrupted and incomplete ritual. The community cannot fully purge and expel Cecelia from their midst because her body cannot be laid in the ground, reinstating the distinction between the realm of the living and that of the dead. In a phrase given particular irony by a Girardian reading, the parents in the novel make their children stay at home on the day of Cecelia's funeral in fear of the 'contamination of tragedy' (Eugenides 34).

According to Girardian theory, a community bound by fear of contagion will now bond in collective action, joined in a 'single purpose' to purge themselves of the presence of evil (Girard, "Mimesis" 12; *VS* 303). In *The Virgin Suicides,* the community's first move is to blame the 'murdering fence' upon which Cecelia impaled herself:

> ... [A] group of fathers began digging the fence out... It was the greatest show of *common effort* we could remember in our neighbourhood, all those lawyers, doctors, and mortgage bankers locked arm in arm in the trench... the murdering fence came loose. (Eugenides 50 emphasis mine)

This has a brief cathartic effect—'for a moment our century was noble again... everyone felt a lot better' (50). The collective act of violence against the 'murderer' recoheres the community and reinstates their sense of pride in themselves and their nation. However, the satisfaction is extremely fleeting, and they find themselves in need of further collective sacrificial action. Next they turn against the plague of fish flies, followed by a ritual expulsion-by-fire of dead leaves:

> No one ever understood what got into us that year, or why we hated so intensely the crust of dead bugs … blotting out stars on our flags. The *collective* action of digging the trench led to *cooperative* sweeping, bag-carting, patio-hosing… We began raking... we all

> did our part... [we would] burn our leaves... in one of the last rituals of our disintegrating tribe. (Eugenides 52 emphasis mine; 87)

These vehement efforts, too, are briefly satisfying, and described in the language of purgation—'[it] gave us a pleasure we felt all the way to our bowels' (87)—but the contagious crisis continues to escalate. The community, a 'disintegrating tribe', grows more anxious about the 'neighbourhood going down the toilet' (92). The newspaper stories are a 'free-for-all' of grim reports about 'men setting fire to their own houses' and 'fathers shotgunning families before turning the guns on themselves' (92). The contagiousness of violence cannot be contained. The community can only escape this endless violence with the spectacular death of a Girardian scapegoat: the Lisbon sisters are ideal candidates.

The first indication of the Lisbon sisters' eligibility as scapegoats is their marginality and lack of stable identity, exacerbated by their position in their modern American community. I have argued that internal mediation is inherent to the American Dream and its lack of social boundaries and systems: a conspicuously absent social system in the novel is an effective rite of passage between childhood and adulthood. A journalist in the novel, writing about suburban ennui, observes that 'the extended childhood America has bestowed on its young turns out to be a wasteland, where the adolescent feels cut off from both childhood and adulthood' (96).

In the same way, Girard describes adolescents as having lost one status (child) and not yet gained another (adult). The adolescent is 'devoid of stable differences', and is perceived as a conduit for violence (Girard, *VS* 297). Girard refers to primitive tribes in terror of adolescents, exiling them to the wild realms of jungle or desert, where they are subjected to violent rites of passage before returning, status safely fixed, to the community (298). The narrators of *The*

Virgin Suicides are aware that such a graduation is necessary, admiring one classmate's sexual exploits: 'we looked on it as a wonderful initiation... Fontaine gave off the sense of having graduated to the next stage of life' (113). But the Lisbon girls are prevented by their mother from participating in even the diluted rites of passage offered by their community, forbidden to date or go to dances. Mrs Lisbon keeps her daughters under the strict terms of her 'rectitude' (120) and 'surveillance' (117), censoring anything that might initiate the girls into adulthood. Women's magazines, notoriously forthcoming about adolescence and sexuality, are forbidden. Lux is forced to burn her pop music records (144), their home bookshelves are 'bowdlerized' (125), Mrs Lisbon even prevents TV programs from being watched unless she has first checked the TV Guide 'to judge the program's suitability' (84). Even family holidays and outings seem to have stopped, or been radically curtailed, ever since Therese, the oldest daughter, 'turned twelve' (229), in other words, hit puberty. Barred entry to adulthood, the Lisbon sisters are nevertheless 'girls becoming women', 'bursting with their fructifying flesh' (8, 9). After Cecelia's first (unsuccessful) suicide attempt, her therapist expresses concern at her 'repression of adolescent libidinal urges' (18):

> To each of three wildly different ink blots, she had responded, "A banana." He … recommended that they relax their rules. He thought Cecilia would benefit by "having a social outlet... an indispensable step in the process of individuation." (18)

Without this process of 'individuation', the Lisbon girls are—even more than their adrift American adolescent peers—symbols of the undifferentiated, the manifestation of crisis that the community fears. The sisters are given one brief chance to participate in a rite of passage and emerge as adults: the Homecoming dance, a highly ceremonial event. The Homecoming dance is a kind of Saturnalia, an annual ritual of revelry and sexual opportunity. The Homecoming dance is a 'harvest theme', the hall decorated with pumpkins and cornucopia.

Frazer describes such a festival in *The Golden Bough*: 'when the whole population give themselves up to extravagant mirth and jollity, and when the darker passions find a vent... especially with the time of sowing or of harvest' (Frazer 593).

Significantly, Lux is crowned Homecoming Queen. As Frazer described (but did not explain), the revelry of the ancient Saturnalia was but surrounding atmosphere to the main purpose of the festival: the crowning of a 'mock king' in a classic scapegoat-ritual. The mock king would preside over the festivities for a while—but, 'when the thirty days were up… he cut his own throat on the altar' (Frazer 594). Girard expresses distaste for Frazer's work, which he sees as explaining-away 'primitive' mythology (Girard, *VS* 318), and he explains bacchanalia festivals as sacrificial rituals (127), noting that the extravagant rites Frazer inventories are all about undifferentiation: servants may beat their masters, men dress as women, and amongst this highly symbolic crisis the 'substitute king' is in fact a 'sacrificial victim' after whose death the cultural order is immediately, and powerfully, re-enforced (128).[29] Lux's crowning as Homecoming Queen is thus a highly prescient symbol of her fate as a Saturnalia-scapegoat, who, 'wearing mock crowns… have played their little pranks for a few brief hours or days, then passed before their time to a violent death' (Frazer 595).

On the night of the dance, the girls are aware of the event's significance as a 'liminal rite' (Eugenides 113).[30] Their faces glow with 'an air of expectancy... they seem braced for some discovery or change of life' (113). At the dance, they attempt to participate in the teenage ritual,

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[29] See also Girard's discussion of the particular eligibility of kings as 'future sacrificial objects', the monarchy embodying the marginal and taboo, in *Violence*, p. 109-117.

[30] The notion of failed liminal rites is prefigured by Cecelia's suicide whilst wearing a wedding dress (Eugenides 14). Like many women in classical tragedy, Cecelia is a virgin who might have been a bride, but instead becomes a sacrificial victim. (For discussion on this trope with reference to Iphigenia, Polyxena, and Antigone, see Rabinowitz 211)

despite the dresses their mother has made deliberately dowdy: 'Lux found a way of arching her back that made her dress tight in front... then they danced, we all danced...' (127). But the night ends abortively, Lux missing curfew and coming home to an angry mother playing funeral hymns: 'those girls weren't going on any more dates' (134). The disastrous evening is the major turning point in the novel.

The girls also have a slight physical abnormality: they each have two extra canine teeth (Eugenides 40). Girard contends that such a defect marks a person as an ideal scapegoat: such features categorise the person as marginal, belonging to a taboo class (Girard, *SG* 18). It is a small step from the taboo to the sacred. Girard examines the plethora of mythical scapegoats with physical deformities (e.g. Oedipus' limp) and notes that 'physical and moral monstrosity go together in mythology' (35).

It is notable that the Lisbon sisters have two extra *canine* teeth, that is, teeth associated with carnivorae. The blending of human and animal traits is a sign of undifferentiation at its most repulsive: 'the confusion of animals and men provides mythology with its most important and spectacular modality of the monstrous' (Girard, *SG* 49). The sisters are given animal traits recurrently in the novel, as when Bonnie appears in 'plumage', a shirt covered in feathers, 'stuck all over with quills' and stinking with bird-odour (Eugenides 158), or Cecelia whose bracelets jingle 'like an animal with a bell on its collar' (42). The description of Lux's physical encounter with Trip is wholly animal:

> A creature with a hundred mouths started sucking the marrow from his bones... Her feet, wet from the lawn, gave off a pasture smell. He felt … her bristly thighs, and then with terror he put his finger in the ravenous mouth of the animal leashed below her waist… Two beasts lived in the car, one above, snuffling and biting him, and one

> below, struggling to get out of its damp cage... he felt fur, and an oily substance like otter insulation. (Eugenides 81)

After her liaison with Trip, Lux becomes sexually promiscuous, and her sexual acts are described in birdlike terms as she 'copulates' with 'faceless' men on the roof of her house in the icy rain, sweeping her arms back and forth like 'wings' (140). Her lack of sexual inhibition is also another classic mythical sign of transgression that will necessitate sacrificial purgation, the promiscuous woman 'a pervasive signifier of potential danger, source of infection, and fatal punishment' (James 25).

There are allusions throughout the novel to the girls as mythical and monstrous, to Lux's 'mythic mutability that allowed her to possess three or four arms at once' (Eugenides 82), and in further undifferentiation, Cecilia 'writes of her sisters and herself as a single entity... a mythical creature with ten legs and five heads' (38). This lack of stable differences is a recurring theme, as the narrators continually have trouble remembering that the girls are 'all different people' rather than 'five replicas', uncanny monstrous doubles with identical faces and 'the same blonde hair' (26). Seeing them in their homecoming dresses, the boys aren't 'even sure which girl [is] which' (122) and in the mêlée of the dancefloor 'the Lisbon girls looked identical again' (132). A photograph of the girls shows them at a theme park totem-pole, 'each girl substituting her face for a sacred animal' (222). In mythical terms, the girls are holy monsters, destined for the altar.

In perfection of her like/unlike qualities, the scapegoat goes through what Girard describes as the 'sacrificial preparation' of isolation, rendering the scapegoat 'wholly sacrificable', making 'more foreign a victim who is too much a part of the community... in order to eliminate his

lingering and superfluous humanity' (Girard, *VS* 272). The Lisbon girls are isolated in their home for months. The girls no longer attend school, Mr Lisbon resigns from his job, and the family vanishes behind closed curtains as 'the house receded behind its mists' (Eugenides 145). Their home becomes a convenient focal point for the built-up communal emotions of fear and horror. Eventually 'no-one ventured to the house any more' (159), and 'stepping on [their property] was bad luck' (95). The house, once an attractive suburban home, becomes a grim sepulchre squatting in a filthy yard, and the street fills with its stench of rot and decay (165):

> The blue slate roof … visibly darkened. The yellow bricks turned brown. Bats flew out of the chimney in the evening… (Eugenides 83)
>
> …the Lisbon house remained dark, a tunnel, an emptiness, past our smoke and flames… (87)

The girls' 'superfluous humanity' is literally falling away from them: where once was 'fructifying flesh', a neighbour observes Bonnie slinking outside before dawn, and Lux on the roof at night,

> '[Bonnie was] visibly wasting away … her long neck was thin and white and she had the rickety painful walk of a Biafran … (Eugenides 164)
>
> [We saw Lux's] jutting ribs, the insubstantiality of her thighs … the basins of her collarbones collected water…. (142)

A 'perfectly adapted' scapegoat is 'cut off from the community', a 'sacred monster' whose death is the result of inevitable momentum (Girard, *VS* 272). The narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* admit that they no longer know the girls, who have transformed into no more than 'incarcerated shadows' (Eugenides 141). They have become wraiths, 'creatures so barely alive that their deaths came as little change' (170). The period of isolation has done its work:

> We could no longer evoke with our inner ears the precise pitches and lilts of the Lisbon girls' voices.... The colors of their eyes were fading, the location of moles, dimples… "They're just memories now," Chase Buell said sadly. "Time to write them off." (Eugenides 180)

The sisters are ready to be sacrificed.

Bonnie slips her thin neck into a noose; Mary her head into the oven; Therese chases her sleeping pills with gin and Lux lies in the car, inhaling exhaust while the cigarette lighter burns its shape into her soft pale palm (Eugenides 216). The paramedics take them away, replaying now-familiar roles before the narrators' eyes:

> Under the molting trees and above the blazing, overexposed grass those four figures paused in tableau: the two slaves offering the victim to the altar (lifting the stretcher into the [ambulance]), the priestess brandishing the torch (waving the flannel nightgown), and the drugged virgin rising up on her elbows, with an otherworldly smile on her pale lips. (Eugenides 6)

The potential difference between a suicide and a victim seized and murdered by unanimous community action is not as great as it might seem. In Ancient Greek scapegoat rituals, an illusion of voluntariness was in fact preferable, and the people would ask the hapless victim to give 'consent' at the altar, even forcing sacrificial animals to nod their heads (Bremmer 308). Girard also notes that many acts of scapegoating consisted of forcing the victim to the edge of a cliff or similarly perilous position, allowing the community to get rid of the scapegoat without resorting to direct physical contact:

> The responsibility for the death rests upon no-one in particular... the chances of further division in the community are diminished. In the case of the cliff, the

> community's role can be almost entirely passive. It consists of blocking all avenues of escape except over the cliff. Quite frequently the victim will become so panicked that he will not have to be pushed... (Girard, "Mythical Text" 928)

Having driven the Lisbon girls to the edge of the cliff and watched them jump, the community may now recohere.

The catharsised community gets back into the swing of things at a debutante party, just as Girardian theory describes, 'relieved of their tensions... a more harmonious group' (Girard, "Mimesis" 12). It is the first whole-community celebratory event depicted in the novel—'everyone from the neighbourhood passed through the O'Connor house that night' (Eugenides 236)—the neighbourhood, it seems, is finally free of contagious violence and united again. The Lisbon girls are, metaphorically, lying dead on the altar, and their deaths have made the party possible. Their dead presence is as palpable as the environmental decay associated with them—in this case the swampy lake, which is suddenly welcome rather than dreadful: 'the rotting smell pervading the air seemed only a crowning touch of festive atmosphere' (235).

The party is charged with a heady sense of hope, of renewed belief in the American Dream: 'raising champagne glasses, people said our industry was coming back, our nation, our way of life' (Eugenides 236). The young debutante, a symbol of American suburbia, takes the spotlight to dance with her father, and 'everyone toasted her future' (236). Girls in formal dresses kiss the narrators in drunken joy: 'they were bound for college, husbands, child rearing... bound, in other words, for life' (235). There is music, laughter, and optimism: 'people were having a good time' (236).

The sacrifice seems to have served its purpose. As Girardian theory predicts, the community's attitude towards the girls now moves from collective revulsion to a kind of numinous awe: 'having plunged the community into strife, the surrogate victim restores peace and order by his departure…The explanation for this extraordinary difference falls naturally within the domain of religion' (Girard, *VS* 90).

The narrators react to the Lisbon sisters' deaths by forming a private cult of collective worship. They meet daily to recite a liturgy of memories of the girls, including readings of Lisbon family history from the holy book of Cecelia's journal (Eugenides 238). They are self-appointed High Priests with a hoard of 'sacred objects' they 'faithfully keep': Mary's lipstick, Bonnie's candles, Therese's specimen slides and Lux's brassiere (246). The reliquary also holds a hospital photograph of Lux's cervix, an icon of terror and wonder which 'stares at us like an inflamed eye' (155), and the girls' laminated cards bearing the image of the Virgin Mary (200). The girls appear to their worshippers in dreams, and in their 'religious meditations' of solitary pleasure (147, 186, 238).

The sisters' destiny to be goddesses is prefigured throughout the novel. Religious allusions surround them. The girls are guardians of a shrine of candles to Cecelia, 'tending the flames' day and night with the vigilance of Vestal Virgins over the sacred fire (Eugenides 91). The narrators sense that Old Mrs Karafilis, the mysterious and oracular Greek ancient across the street, communes telepathically with the girls, their spirits dwelling upon 'secret signs' (173). Towards the end of their lives the girls are often seen (or nearly seen) with icons of Catholicism, such as the rosary beads caressed by Bonnie each morning before sunrise, or the images of the Virgin Mary which the girls place around the neighbourhood overnight.

When Trip meets Lux, there is a 'heavenly light in the room...in his left ear the ringing of the cosmic Om' (Eugenides 73). He describes his encounter with Lux 'as one might of a religious

experience, a visitation or vision, any rupture into this life from beyond...' (81). Both Cecelia and Lux are described as having wings (16, 148), and Lux is further described as a 'goddess' and 'angel' (144, 142), as here in the act of lovemaking: 'They spoke of being pinned to the chimney as if by two great beating wings, and of the slight blond fuzz above her upper lip that felt like plumage... Her eyes shone, burned...' (142).

The girls are often depicted within a glow of light, walking down hallways surrounded by a golden glow (Eugenides 52, 100), or 'a fuzzy aura... a shimmering' (82), 'the Lisbon girls were only a patch of glare like a congregation of angels' (19). Their photographs fade to leave glowing 'phosphorescent outlines' like residual haloes (202).

In time, the rest of the neighbourhood also sees the light of divinity in the Lisbon girls: 'though at first people blamed them, gradually a sea change took place, so that the girls were seen not as scapegoats but seers' (Eugenides 244). The virgin-seer is a frequent motif in Ancient Greek scapegoat-myths, seen in the story of two girls who sacrificed themselves, as an oracle required, in order that Thebes should win at war (Bremmer 302), or the daughters of Orion who went to the altar in order to stop the plague that struck their town of Orchomenos (302). In their turn, the Lisbon girls have taken on the malevolent plague that threatened their neighbourhood and borne it away.

Francisco Collado-Rodriguez identifies the mythical nature of *The Virgin Suicides*, but does not employ Girardian theory in his analysis. He reads the novel as a Frazerian fertility ritual, claiming that

> …the novel eventually favors the mythical understanding of the girls as priestesses of Mother Earth who offer themselves as scapegoats in a fertility rite meant to bring

> about the regeneration of life... The Virgin Suicides ultimately advocates a return to the ancestral wisdom of Mother Earth worship prior to its displacement by the patriarchal ideology that, the novel contends, is responsible for the impending destruction of the planet. (Collado-Rodriguez 38)

What Collado-Rodriguez apparently fails to notice is that the deaths of the virgins do not bring about regeneration—which rather calls into question the 'wisdom' of Mother Earth worship and its sacrificial rites for which he claims the novel is 'advocating'. In fact, I would argue that the novel illustrates the failure of the scapegoat-sacrifice to redeem the community.

The Girardian 'happy solution' (Girard, "Mimesis" 13) of the scapegoat-mechanism does not last long. The narrators' lives after the suicides are not restored to peace and prosperity—on the contrary, the neighbourhood sinks further into decay. Their social structures and routines evaporate—'we rarely ran into one another any more' (Eugenides 244)—and the failing automotive industry crumbles in a 'continuing decline' (244). Households fall apart, as 'families moved away, or splintered' (245). Even the weather is 'disappoint[ing]', and the narrators are 'slowly carted into the melancholic remainder of our lives' (244).

The neighbourhood's continued decomposition is symbolised by the conditions in a backyard greenhouse:

> [Flowers] in that false paradise now withered, weeds sprang up amid scrupulous identification tags... The only thing that remained was the steam vapor… filling our nostrils with the moisture and aroma of a rotting world.... it was hopeless, hopeless... (Eugenides 102)

The scapegoat-mechanism has led to a 'false paradise' which is now 'withering'; the sacrifice of the Lisbon girls has failed to redeem their community.

The narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* find their attempts to deify the Lisbon girls thwarted by their awareness of the girls as innocent victims: 'though some of us saw Lux as a force of nature... an ice goddess... the majority knew she was just a girl in danger, or in pursuit, of catching her death' (Eugenides 150). Their worship-meetings in the temple of their treehouse fail to satisfy: 'we always ended these sessions with the feeling that we were retracing a path that led nowhere, and we grew more and more sullen and frustrated' (238). *The Virgin Suicides* narrators' recognition of the Lisbon girls as victims disrupts the tragic scapegoat-effect; *hamartia*, that crucial element of the heroine's error, the pinning of the crisis onto the scapegoat, is put in doubt. The truth is a 'force of disruption' acting upon their catharsis as the moist air upon the their cache of relics: 'we haven't kept our tomb sufficiently airtight, and our sacred objects are perishing' (246). The sacred monsters become ordinary teenage girls. This modern tragedy comes unstuck.

I have previously introduced Martha Reineke's concept of a 'corporeal ethics' (Reineke, *Intimate Domain* 175) found in Sophocles *Antigone*; Reineke argues that the play puts not only Antigone's dilemma but Antigone's body, and its relationship to the body of her brother, at the centre of the audience's attention. *The Virgin Suicides* also puts its protagonists' bodies at the core of the tragic action. While the novel form cannot duplicate the stage play's capacity to present the scapegoat's body as a real physical spectacle, Eugenides uses his dense and descriptive prose to invite the reader to an even closer form of intimacy with the Lisbon girls' bodies than the proximity between actor and audience. As the narrators mentally linger on the details of Bonnie's thighs, Lux's eyelashes, or Cecilia's wrists, the reader may experience an increasing physical empathy with the girls.

The book opens with a visceral description of Cecilia's body after her suicide attempt, detailing her 'small body', with 'wet hair hung down her back… her extremities were blue' (Eugenides 5). Various body parts are itemised: her hands, her eyes, her wrists, her 'budding chest'. At the end of the first chapter, Cecelia is successful in her second suicide attempt. The narrators describe in detail the impact of the spiked fence on her body, as it 'punctured her left breast, traveled through her inexplicable heart, separated two vertebrae without shattering either, and [came] out her back' (19). The second-hand information the narrators glean about the funeral is also focused on intimate observation of Cecelia's body, 'her eighty-six pounds, pale skin and hair… her face and shoulders… her hands with their bitten nails, her rough elbows, the twin prongs of her hips, and even her knees' (23).

Cecelia's name is obviously reminiscent of Saint Cecilia, a Catholic saint martyred in 177AD and the subject of a pious romance narrative in which she, a young virgin, is killed in her bath and left lying in the bloody water: Cecelia Lisbon is found 'afloat in her pink pool' (Eugenides 5). Saint Cecilia is also considered the earliest incorruptible saint, according to documents written by Pope Pascal who discovered her body in 1559, exhumed it and interred it in a new church as a sign of her 'sanctity', in other words, her innocence. Cecelia Lisbon is thus a powerful figure of female victimisation suffered by a female body which then acts as a physical repository of memory, a lasting witness declaring the Reinekian 'corporeal ethics'; whereas her saintly namesake is preserved as a relic, Cecelia's body is preserved in the memoir-narrative of the narrators of *The Virgin Suicides*.

The other sisters are also very present in the pages as physical bodies. Bonnie is first mentioned with another aside itemising body parts, describing her failure to learn a musical instrument not as a result of lack of talent but of its impact on her flesh: 'her hands were too small… her chin hurt… her fingertips bled… her upper lip swelled' (Eugenides 6). The opening pages move on

to introduce the rest of the sisters, whose bodies we are invited to observe before we have any sense of their personalities: 'short, round-buttocked in denim, with roundish cheeks that recalled that same dorsal softness' (6). Later, when the boys complain that they are beginning to forget what the girls are like, they mean they are forgetting the details of the girls bodies: the 'colors of their eyes… the location of moles, dimples, centipede scars' (84).

Lux's body becomes imagined as a kind of public property through her sexual promiscuity and the narratives that then circulate amongst the boys. Lux has already been described as 'the most naked person with clothes on' (Eugenides 40); once she takes her clothes off, her body becomes not only visible but semitransparent, as her lovers record not only the shapes of her ribs, thighs, and collarbones, 'the patch of hair missing above her left ear' and the cold sores in her mouth, but also perceive the state of her digestive organs via the taste of her saliva, and diagnose 'malnourishment or illness or grief' radiating from deep inside her body (66).[31] This fascination with the inner workings of Lux's body extends to the narrators bribing a nurse for the details of Lux's medical examination:

> Lux in a stiff paper gown stepping onto the scale (Eugenides 99), opening her mouth for the thermometer (98.7), and urinating into a plastic cup (WBC 6–8 occ. clump; mucus heavy; leukocytes 2 +). The simple appraisal "mild abrasions" reports the condition of her uterine walls… (70)

There are no boundaries to the narrators' infiltration of the Lisbon sisters' bodies, no constraints imposed by courtesy, and no limits necessitated by the medium of this tragedy—the novel is not limited by time and place, by firsthand witness, or by the depiction of action. The reader is offered intimate access to inner recesses of the girls bodies, just as the narrators rifle

[31] This idea is repeated twice in the novel: earlier, a boy kissing Bonnie claims he can 'sense her whole being… through her lips… salt of tear ducts… the juices of her inner organs' (Eugenides 59).

through their abandoned bathroom cabinet to find 'ointments for ringworm and conjunctivitis… salves applied to nether regions, [medicines] pressed, inserted, applied into or onto the girls' bodies' (Eugenides 103). This access extends to being the first witnesses of the girls dead bodies on the night of the mass suicide, from Bonnie's 'blackening eye sockets, blood pooling in lower extremities, [and] stiffening joints' (97) to a final poignant close-up of Lux's hand with its cigarette-burned palm (97). Furthermore, the narrators again offer the reader details of a medical report, this time the autopsy, 'peering inside' the girls' bodies all the way to their 'smooth blue hearts [that] looked like water balloons… Therese's ileum… Bonnie's esophagus… Lux's tepid blood' (100).

Yet for all this visceral detail, the narrators remain excluded from the girls' inner lives. As they look on Bonnie's hanging corpse, they sense that its physical presence is 'murmuring the secret not only of her death but of her life itself, of all the girls' lives' (Eugenides 97), but they are unable to decipher what that secret is. They register the shock of her body's materiality, 'so still… such enormous weight' (97), but it is weighted with knowledge that is beyond their understanding. The sisters' corpses are heavy with meaning that exceeds their community's capacity for comprehension, a reality ironically illustrated by Mrs Lisbon's irrational impulse to try to keep Bonnie's dead body from exceeding the bounds of the paramedics' stretcher. Bonnie's lifeless hand keeps falling off, and Mrs Lisbon keeps replacing it: "Stay," she commands it, but 'the hand flopped out again' (98). Likewise, despite all their frantic attempts to know the girls by knowing their bodies, the narrators admit that they are lost in the extended metaphor of their own making:

> Hardly have we begun to palpate their grief than we find ourselves wondering whether this particular wound was mortal or not, or whether (in our blind doctoring) it's a wound at all. It might just as well be a mouth, which is as wet and as warm. The scar

> might be over the heart or the kneecap. We can't tell. All we can do is go groping up the legs and arms, over the soft bivalvular torso, to the imagined face. It is speaking to us. But we can't hear. (Eugenides 77)

The above passage is highly reminiscent of a phrase of Reineke's in *Intimate Domain*: 'A Voice Speaks from a Wound'. Reineke, reading Sophocles' *Oedipus* and *Antigone*, argues that 'a central feature of trauma is that the wounded body becomes an object of dread and fear to those who encounter it' (Reineke, *Intimate Domain* 157). Oedipus's body epitomises this, and only by expulsion may his body become a 'salvific' rather than a source of 'pollution'. But in *Antigone*, Polyneices' wounded body, which ought to be expelled, is instead given burial rites by his sister. Reineke argues that Antigone's libations are a way of confronting the problematic legacy of her origins, the 'contagion that has haunted her family', turning towards the trauma and unravelling it by taking her own body into that sacrificial space, and identifying herself as made of the same flesh as her brother—she will 'love her brother as herself' (163). Reineke describes Antigone as 'caught up in trauma that has left her incapable of assimilating the meaning of that trauma within the social context' (164); she must defy the social context, in an 'intercorporeal' revolt that puts her outside of all previous systems of meaning, an action that so confuses onlookers that the chorus expresses concern that her body is possessed (164). Only in the 'intimate domain' of touching her brother's wounded body and identifying that body with her own, can Antigone break the cycle of sacrifice.

The narrators testify to their desire to turn the messy human reality of the Lisbon sisters' gory deaths 'into a story we could live with' (Eugenides 234). The novel is presented as their attempt to turn their lived experience into an explicable story, contained and, finally, complete and 'put to rest' as the Lisbon sisters assume their artistic roles as 'dead women who serve as spectacles

to be sung about' (Kemp 277). This is reminiscent of Lynda Nead's observations about the place of the female body in art:

> If the female body is defined as lacking containment and issuing filth and pollution from its faltering outlines and broken surface, then the classical forms [of female nudes in statues and paintings] perform a kind of magical regulation of the female body, containing it and momentarily repairing the orifices and tears. This, however, can only be a fleeting success; the margins are dangerous, and will need to be subjected to the discipline of art again. (Nead 87)

The Lisbon sisters bodies are presented as both mysterious and dangerous, the girls identities' lacking in stable boundaries, and their various wrists, vaginas, necks, et cetera as sites of physical and ontological rupturings. The narrators' attempt to contain the girls in 'a story we could live with' reads as an attempt to stem the scapegoat-pollution issuing from their unruly bodies and render them, instead, in the pure and crisply defined media of the printed page—a stand-in, perhaps, for the equally reassuring qualities of white marble. The narrators of *The Virgin Suicides*, despite all their professed desires for bodily connection with, and bodily understanding of, the Lisbon sisters, never move beyond thinking of the girls as unapproachably Other, and of trying to reduce them to something less uncanny. In Reineke's terms, they never enter the intimate domain, and thus the text cannot fully explicate the system of sacrifice behind the tragic narrative. The fact that the scapegoats in this tragedy are women is thus highly significant—it is their female bodies that the boys cannot ultimately comprehend, that stand as an obstacle between the boys (and the text they narrate) and insight.

It is therefore an oversimplification to classify this modern American tragedy as, rather than a substitute for sacrificial ritual, its simple opposite: an explicit performance of anti-ritual. It is not simply the tragic genre recast in a Scriptural mould, retaining all its usual mythical elements

but with a final twist that fully inverts its purpose. The narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* do, at *nearly* the final point, acquit the Lisbon sisters of guilt, and instead lay the blame upon 'something sick at the heart of the country... the pain it inflicted on even its most innocent citizens' (Eugenides 231). But this compassionate conclusion is problematised by the novel's closing pages. The narrators prevaricate in placing blame, turning their frustration upon the Lisbon sisters: 'not … mystery but simple selfishness' (242). The novel is posited as a product of the narrators' obsession with the Lisbon girls, a recounting of their history complete with numbered exhibits. The narrators have spent decades re-treading this ground, trying to find insight and closure, but admit that 'in the end we had pieces of the puzzle, but no matter how we put them together, gaps remained, oddly shaped emptinesses…' (241). Is it possible that the reader might be able to see something in these gaps that the narrators cannot? Throughout *The Virgin Suicides* run the clues that its narrators have come close to the truth, but just failed to grasp it. The final three pages contain repeated sighs of resignation and defeat:

> All wisdom ends in paradox… even as we make these conclusions we feel our throats plugging up, because they are both true and untrue… we are certain only of the insufficiency of explanations…this is all a chasing after the wind… we will never find the pieces... (Eugenides 241–243)

Martin Dines has commented on *The Virgin Suicides* as a Gothic narrative characterised by 'uncertainty and anxiety'. For Dines, the novel presents the narrators' mission to 'present comforting, codified narratives of the suburbs' as ultimately futile, an attempt to 'disassociate' from 'conflict and trauma' (Dines 2)—in other words, the narrators' awareness of the Lisbon sisters' deaths as symptomatic of a larger conflict within their community, a trauma experienced by all its members that was not neatly resolved by their deaths. Keith Millard positions the novel as part of a tradition of American novels in which 'almost every search ends in the full

knowledge of the inadequacy of searches', and despite the narrators' systematic approach to their quest for resolution, 'every methodology results principally in an understanding of the limits of methodologies' (Millard 74). Uncertainty and imprecision thus take the place of unanimous condemnation or acquittal of the Lisbon girls.

In much of myth and literature, women are represented as unnatural extremes: 'the extremely good, pure and helpless, or the extremely dangerous, chaotic and seductive' (Bronfen 181). I have earlier made reference to Shakespeare's tragic women as generally falling into categories of either the classic guilty scapegoat or the innocent Christ figure—for example, Lady Macbeth who is guilty of monstrous crimes against the social order, contrasted with Cordelia in *King Lear*, who is wholly pure and innocent. Cecelia's name does carry some echo of Shakespeare's Cordelia, whose dead body is inexplicable to the male observers of her corpse: as Philippa Berry casts it, Cordelia's dead body is 'the play's central riddle', and she remains 'a mystery even in her death' (Berry 8). In a similar way, the narrators attempt to cast Cecelia Lisbon and her sisters as saintlike, and their dead bodies as ineffable mysteries. The narrators are continually attempting to render the girls as the figures of their imagination, just as Cordelia is a kind of blank canvas for Lear's imagination—a 'surface' on which he may 'inscribe his particular desires and fantasies' and her corpse is the final spectacle that 'holds and directs the all-male gaze', becoming 'whatever Lear makes her' (Rutter 5).

But the Lisbon sisters are not so easily categorised or inscribed upon. They are neither saints nor sinners. Despite the narrators' vacillating impulses to cast them as one or the other, to revere them as goddesses or to condemn them as selfish taboo breakers, they return again and again to the simple fact of the girls' complex humanity. Their first close encounter with the sisters, at the group date for the homecoming dance, is described in precisely these terms. Each boy has cherished a two-dimensional fantasy of the girls as nubile teenage sirens; however,

'beside the actual living girls, the boys realised the paltriness of these images' (Eugenides 56). The girls are not mythical creatures, but ordinary teenagers who bicker about what to put on the radio and joke about their neighbours' ugly gardens. 'Inverse properties [are] also discarded: notions of the girls as damaged or demented' (56): the girls are not monsters or criminals, and this strikes the boys as a 'revelation… "They weren't all that different from my sister," Kevin Head said' (56). While the narrators struggle to maintain this revelation in their minds, and in fact revert back to casting the girls as mythical figures, this evidence of the girls' ordinariness remains with the reader, and contributes to the 'audience-consciousness' that the novel contains more truth than the naïve narrators can comprehend. The fact that the victims are women makes them more likely to be mythologised by the narrators, and yet the text presents evidence that this mythological thinking is misguided.

Nancy Rabinowitz has suggested that women in Greek tragedy are depicted as having a complex relationship to the act of seeing. Complicating Laura Mulvey's well-known formulation about women as the perpetual object of the male gaze, Rabinowitz reads the plays of Sophocles and Euripides and finds female characters gazing *back* at men, and daring to venture into those physical spaces—primarily outdoor spaces—in which one may watch others rather than merely being watched (Rabinowitz 196). She notes, for example, the image of Polyxena standing up to Odysseus in Euripides' *Hecabe* and saying, "I see you". Likewise, the Lisbon sisters surprise the narrators with their capacity for looking. The boys are shocked to discover that 'they had been looking out at us as intensely as we had been looking [at them]' (Eugenides 118). This returning gaze is both transgressive and redemptive. As tragic women, acting in defiance of the norms against looking marks the Lisbon girls as following in Polyxena's footsteps towards her sacrificial fate. However, it is such acts that reveal the girls as complex human beings, rather than the two-dimensional cutouts of the boys' imaginations, and thus, which provide the reader with clues that the narrators are looking through myth-tinted

glasses. The girls, in these minor acts of subjective autonomy, become visible as the innocent victims of their community's mythical thinking.

A final clue as to the novel's 'self-consciousness' about sacrifice may be gleaned from the Lisbon sisters' surname. For Girard, the revelation contained in Judeo-Christian Scriptural narratives is the notion that violence does not come from the gods, but from man. The disruption of scapegoat-ritual and myth is the disruption of the tradition of attributing crises to magical or supernatural causes, and the consequent necessity for humanity to take responsibility for its own crises. I therefore see significance in the Lisbon name, with its allusion to the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, a disastrous event that rent the fabric of European religious and cultural life. It undermined 'blind belief in God' and thus damaged the authority of the Inquisition, who claimed to be the empowered agents of an angry God in their violent persecution of victims. Others responded with increased belief in a capricious God who demanded sacrificial blood for Lisbon's sins. The Lisbon name is thus associated with prevarication about the source of violence and the status of victims.

Following Cousineau, I consider that the 'pattern created by [a novel's] events' (*Ritual Unbound* 18) may present the reader with the key to its demystification. In *The Virgin Suicides*, I submit that this 'pattern' is found in the novel's rich profusion of tragic tropes, which evoke not only the sacrificial tales of ancient myth and tragedy, but also the anti-myth-pattern of Scriptural narratives from which Girard traces an indelible impression on the Western imagination. The novel is loaded with references to contagion and pollution, marginality and monstrosity, environmental decay and catastrophe, undifferentiation, collective desire and collective action—all the themes of myth and tragedy. The novel's dense and detailed 'tragicality' strongly invokes the sacrificial function of myth, but in doing so, the novel sows the seeds of its own disruption. The reader traces in its pages not only the shadow of Oedipus, but also of Joseph

and his envious brothers, Antigone, Cordelia, even Willy Loman. Despite the novel and its narrators' reluctance to reach a certain resolution, *The Virgin Suicides* may finally be understood as an 'anti-tragedy'.

4. The Ice Storm: Excess and Irony

In this chapter I will read *The Ice Storm*, as I read *The Virgin Suicides*, as a modern tragedy with characteristic features of a scapegoat-myth, but which demonstrates ambivalence about guilt that leads to an uncertain conclusion. Moody's 1994 novel has attracted even less critical attention than *The Virgin Suicides*: there exists one book chapter on the novel, part of a collection broadly concerned with popular music in fiction (Snider); and it is mentioned amongst other texts in two journal articles, one of which is about the 1970s oil crisis (Long), and the other about comic books. The latter, 'Embodiments of the Real: The Counterlinguistic Turn in the Comic-Book Novel', by Marc Singer, examines the recurring comic-book references in a number of novels, including *The Ice Storm*, as 'a form of metonymic combination that can conflate or arrest time; as visual narratives, they offer the possibility of escaping conventional linguistic signification' (Singer 281). Singer's study is tightly focused on the linguistic attributes of the novel, the 'metonymic and synecdochic relationships of continuity' and ideas of escaping traditional linguistic signification (281). Such a reading has some relevance to my study, as a confirmation that the text does indeed deal with the kind of crisis that makes the characters feel that the times are out of joint. However, there seems to have been no academic consideration of *The Ice Storm* as a tragedy—an oversight I remedy in the following pages, as I demonstrate that the novel is charged with tragic themes and resonances.

The Ice Storm is set in the heartland of the New England American Dream, in Fairfield County, Connecticut. The novel traces the dramatic events of a single winter's weekend in the lives of a few suburbanites, in particular the Hood family and their neighbours the Williamses. It is 1973, and the spirit of sexual adventure arrives in these suburbs with the advent of the 'key party', at which the men put their keys into a bowl, and their wives in turn pick out keys assigning them a sexual partner for the night. On the night of the key party, an extraordinary snowstorm sweeps

through the town, wreaking environmental havoc parallel to the built-up social chaos reaching its climax at the key party.

The Hood family live in the wealth and ease that exemplifies the American Dream; to observe their lifestyle is to look upon the vision of having achieved all that the Dream aspires to, a secure position in 'the most congenial and superficially calm of suburbs' located in 'the wealthiest state in the Northeast' which is the pinnacle-point of 'the most affluent country on earth' (Moody, *TIS* 3). Suburbia is an enclave, a safe zone beyond the competitive cut-and-thrust of the city, a place in which competition is ostensibly void because everyone has everything they want. The town is called New Canaan (30)—the Biblical name of the Promised Land. Benjamin Hood reflects on having arrived: 'He had two kids, a house and a lawn mower, a Pontiac station wagon with simulated wood panelling on the side, a new Firebird, and a Labrador retriever named Daisy Chain' (14).

The Promised Land, then, is evidently a land rich in material possessions. The novel contains some lush descriptions of the accoutrements of the Dream, as the narrative voice lingers on the materiality of success. In the following passage, the litany of brand names echoes against and melds with the names of the wearers, elevating them to the heady status of the fashion icons themselves; the effect is heightened by the final mention of Andy Warhol, whose name is as full of fame and mystique as the designers he wears—and for the very reason that he has created himself as a mirror of popular culture, an imitator and utiliser and magnifier of the symbols of modern consumerism.

> Bob Colacello in his emerald green corduroy suit by Polidori of Rome, Yves St Laurent silk shirt, Givenchy cologne; Vincent Freeman in his dark brown custom-tailored gabardine jacket, tan pants, white Brooks Brothers shirt; Jed Johnson in blue Yves St Laurent blazer, light blue Brooks Brothers shirt, striped tie from Tripler's,

> New Man pants; Andy Warhol in his chestnut DeNoyer velveteen jacket, Levi's, boots by Berlutti di Priigi, Brooks Brothers shirt, red and gray Brooks Brothers tie, brown wool V-neck Yves St Laurent pullover. (Moody, *TIS* 185)

Mimetic desire leads the suburbanites to wear these branded clothes because they are ostensibly objects that impart something of the designer's identity to the wearer. By imitating their models, the subjects aim to achieve not just equal status with their models, but to share in their essence, to literally walk in their shoes. The wearers' names are lost, effaced amongst the names of the designers, as they mimetically attempt to cast off their identities and be subsumed into the glamorous selves of their models. The ubiquity and availability of these designer items makes clear that these highly desirable identities can be purchased in a store.

The pervasiveness of consumerism is ever-present in the novel, in constant, almost dizzying reference to advertisements and brand names. Wendy Hood contemplates the way 'the shape of advertisements ruled the world' (Moody, *TIS* 130), and feels comforted. When Benjamin opens Janey Williams's medicine cabinet, he sees not a host of nonspecific toiletries but 'Cover Girl Thick Lash mascara, Revlon Ultima pancake, Max Factor lipstick (chocolate)', not to mention 'Helena Rubenstein Brush-on Peel-off Mask… Bonne Bell Ten-O-Six lotion, Clairol Balsam Color' and even 'Kotex tampons' (25). The era of generic items is over. Everything is a brand, a symbol of something allegedly greater, more meaningful, more elusive, as promised by advertising with its call to mimetic desire, the invitation to *be a Cover Girl.*

The mimetic nature of desire is made very plain throughout the novel. The first instance is the triangular desire that makes Benjamin long for Janey, the wife of his neighbour, Jim Williams. Benjamin both admires and resents Jim, with his 'half-baked' career of investing in modern 'gizmos' like Styrofoam packing bubbles, which have yielded great success that Benjamin feels is unearned: 'He never had bad luck. He never had a bad day' (Moody, *TIS* 10). As Benjamin

sits in the Williams's spare room with his pants around his ankles, he admits to himself that 'he knew... that it was always the cuckold or the betrayed who was honoured by the adulterer' (125). He is aware that his envy of Jim is part of the reason he is trying to take Jim's place in their marital bed.

Benjamin is a creature of mimesis, trying desperately to be like his neighbours, to comply with fashions and fit in. On the night of the key party he appeals to Elena to quit her resistance to the social life of their suburb, and to let him join in the game, 'try to be part of the neighbourhood' by 'throw[ing] in with the rest of the people' and 'run[ning] with the pack' (Moody, *TIS* 71). But when they arrive, he realises from the first moment that he is out of sync with the mimetic cycle of fashion, the rules that delineate insiders and outsiders:

> Only months before, Benjamin Hood had lived in the certainty that his dress was in accord with the prevailing climatic conditions. But now, just as quickly, he was solitary in his garb. He dressed poorly. He disgraced himself. (Moody, *TIS* 107)

But Benjamin is not 'solitary' in being driven by mimesis. In fact, moments later Benjamin shifts position, to the role of model, in his antagonistic relationship with a junior colleague, George Clair. Benjamin sees in Clair the vapid imitativeness that he fails to perceive in himself, and 'detest[s] him' for being a 'suburban phony'. Clair is 'full of clichés... concerned with appropriating certain simplistic messages about film, music and sports' (Moody, *TIS* 117), and in repeating these clichés he ingratiates himself with the senior management of their firm. But Clair's enthusiasm for culture is apparently not born of any genuine enthusiasm for films themselves, rather, in true mimetic fashion 'he just wanted the space Benjamin Hood took up' (119). Being much better than Benjamin at picking the next hot trend, Clair is edging him out at work, taking Ben's place in important meetings and networking events.

Elena, Ben's wife, knows that he has been sleeping with Janey Williams, and decides to embrace the key party as a means of revenge. She becomes in this way Janey's rivalrous double, part of the copycat culture of the key party. 'She let herself do certain things because of fashion' (Moody, *TIS* 178), and without any physical desire for Jim Williams, she chooses to have sex with him.

In the same way, Paul and his friend Francis Davenport have a relationship of rivalry and imitation. The crucial scene of their relationship is in the apartment of beautiful society girl Libbets Casey, who is desired by both of them; her presence brings the true nature of Paul and Davenport's 'friendship' to light. Paul has a revelation of the triangle they are stuck in, and sees himself as 'a third term, an unwelcome geometrical element' (Moody, *TIS* 93). Following this revelation, he realises that Davenport has always been his rival, and that Libbets is simply one more object in the succession of stand-ins for the object of what Girard calls 'possessing the mediator's *being*' (Girard, *DDN* 53): '[Davenport] wanted to inhabit his friends, to neutralize them. He wanted Paul's socks and Paul's records and Paul's homework assignments and even Paul's nuclear family...' (Moody, *TIS* 94).

Paul perceives this about Davenport's desire for Libbets, but not his own. He still believes that she is the object that will finally give him ontological satisfaction, the perfect missing piece of his own being: '[she was] some kinda exact opposite he had been circling around' (Moody, *TIS* 180). He desperately longs to acquire her in a way that absorbs the object's properties into himself in 'some sort of contact, some shocking and permanent contact' that will render him 'surgically attached to Libbets' (182). Paul, like his father, has always been a creature of mimesis. He compulsively reads comic books, imagining himself as his fantasy characters: 'sometimes Paul himself was Ben Grimm, and sometimes he was Peter Parker a.k.a. The Spiderman' (80).

Paul recognises that 'these models never worked exactly' (80) but for want of better idols in his outside life, continues to seek solace in his imagined world.

The novel is also telling in its treatment of mimetic desire as deluded, a desire for ontological satisfaction misplaced upon the temporary object. The object of desire in *The Ice Storm* is usually sexual experience—sometimes with a partner, sometimes alone, the partner almost always incidental to the goal of ecstasy, oblivion, or comfort. Benjamin is confused about the nature of sexual desire, its authenticity, since he becomes aroused at odd moments, many of which have Girardian resonances of mimesis, rivalry and sacrifice, including during television broadcasts of Vietnam War 'massacres', while watching the Frazier/Ali boxing rematch, and the sacrificial scapegoatings of the Watergate trials (Moody, *TIS* 6). In this confusion, Benjamin dimly perceives that his sexual desire is not really about wanting a lover. His desire for women casts them as a means to an end: to satisfy the feeling that 'he wanted something he couldn't have' (21), or the feeling that 'desire wasn't about large breasts … It was about hunting for comfort' (7). There is frequent slippage in the novel between the concepts of sex and love, and sex and happiness. On the one hand, the sex which the characters actually experience is portrayed as entirely loveless, such as the congress between Elena and Jim in his car, or Benjamin's drunken tryst with a colleague at his office party. On the other hand, sex is often, in the characters' minds, the object which, if attained, will bring love and happiness. To Paul, love *is* sex, and when meditating on 'love' he argues to himself that 'he knew the name of what he was missing', he names 'blow jobs and sixty-nines, orgies… mutual masturbation' and a continuing litany of sex acts; having 'perused [a] copy of the Kama Sutra, 'he knew what love was' (89). He is determined to 'pursue this education' because he doesn't want to be 'as sad as his parents' (89). Paul seems to think that his parents are sad because of a lack of sex. In fact, not only his parents but all the unhappy adults of the neighbourhood are accumulating sexual experiences in

their quests for satisfaction, part of the larger 1960s and 1970s cultural trend to 'sex-charged self-transformation' (Paglia 58), and they are finding that happiness still eludes them.

This 'long sixties' cultural association of sex with renewal has been described as a 're-evaluation of the importance of sex… that amounted to a Dionysiac revival' (Carlevale 365). The New Haven neighbours are looking to sexual revelry to provide 'deliverance' through the release of intoxication and 'de-sublimated sexuality' (365); however, as Carlevale notes, long-sixties American culture was not unaware of the connection between Dionysus and crisis. These modernised rituals were often conscious responses to 'premonitions of imminent cultural disaster' (366), and some commentators even worried that embracing the Dionysiac might have violent and catastrophic consequences; 'the quest for primitive rituals of renewal might devolve into true blood rites that demanded real victims' (366). But others contended that in practice, the 'paradise of the senses' sought by bored suburbanites turned out to be 'just another kind of desert' (366). This latter assessment is demonstrated by almost every character in the novel after a sexual experience—and Janey Williams is so disillusioned that she decides, after Benjamin is undressed in her bed, that further action is futile, and running errands is a preferable use of her afternoon. Wendy Hood, likewise, tries to find more than physical satisfaction in sexual activity. When this fails to gratify, she momentarily resolves to escape the mimetic chase and become desireless: to 'preserve her chastity' and 'starve' her hormonal cycles, protecting herself against disappointment by 'keep[ing] herself free from wants' (Moody, *TIS* 262). The Sisyphean futility of mimetic desire has left many in the community reflecting on the hollowness of their lives.

The novel is full of descriptions of the trappings of the American Dream in tones of ennui or a sort of grim mockery, as in this description of the frenetic acquisitiveness of Eleanor's near

neighbour, reflected in the decor of her bathroom: 'Combs surrounded her, stuck up on all four walls. Dot Halford collected combs' (Moody, *TIS* 156).

The Hoods live next door to a psychiatric facility for the super-rich, and frequently observe the new patients checking in—walking proof that material success is not the same as ontological satisfaction, as 'the lonely and decrepit' are brought into the facility in their 'Mercedes and BMWs', wearing 'rings and minks' but appearing evidently 'worn out and desperate' (Moody, *TIS* 32).

The Williamses' house is like a mini White House, 'white and squarish with columns in front', a significant symbol of America. But inside, the Williamses' lives are falling apart, and outside the American flag 'hung limply' (Moody, *TIS* 42). Jim Williams is baffled at his wife's dissatisfaction in wealthy New Canaan, the promised land; after attaining the precious object of the American Dream, Janey 'doesn't want the life she used to think she wanted' (177). The Girardian subject inevitably feels this way upon grasping the object that fails to provide ontological transformation, but Jim cannot understand it. Instead, he believes that Janey is 'sick' and 'unstable' because 'she can't be happy' (177).[32] Jim is a real poster-boy for the American Dream: he helped invent an innovative new product (Styrofoam bubbles) for the modern shopping-and-shipping culture, and is reaping huge financial rewards. As a good American husband he has showered his wife with material goods and set her up in a big white house in a fancy suburb—but she is miserable. Still a true believer in the gospel of acquisition, Jim's only explanation for Janey's misery is that she is 'sick' (177). But he doesn't see that wealth hasn't

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[32] While Janey plays a relatively small part in the novel, Jim's characterisation of her is telling: Janey, like the Lisbon sisters and April Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*, has her dissatisfaction rendered as sickness or insanity by the men observing her. Unlike the women in the other novels, Janey escapes becoming the sacrificial victim; in this case, the novel presents Jim's reading of his wife sceptically, as his inability to comprehend the failure of the Dream.

made *him* happy, either: sitting in his car with Elena after their awkward half-minute of intercourse, his unhappiness is expressed mostly as bewilderment.

The suburbanites, apparently unable to conceive that acquisition does not satisfy, turn instead to a new kind of consumerism, which the novel pitches as a capitalist solution for their boredom: 'the commodity being traded was wives' (Moody, *TIS* 77). The various spouses are in denial that this will bring them only 'the cheapest approximation of exalted feeling', since 'the payoff was supposed to be joy' (55). This hypocrisy, or blindness, in the adults who still believe in the values of the Dream despite their misery, stands in contrast to the knowing cynicism of the teenagers. The novel is set on Thanksgiving weekend, that great American monument to the happiness and prosperity promised by the Dream, and to the family values fostered by suburban rituals such as this. But the kids are generally unimpressed with the spirit of the festival: '—What's to be thankful for at Thanksgiving? Davenport asked. Indian corn in plastic wrap for sale next to Velveeta? Butterball turkey with built-in thermometer? Rod McKuen? Helen Reddy doing 'Delta Dawn'?' (99).

The Thanksgiving food at the Hood's home is, like the occasion itself, artificial and lacklustre: the peas in 'simulated butter', a 'sulphurous oil slick' next to a turkey 'carcass… exhumed from its tomb' (Moody, *TIS* 62).

Elena Hood comes from an Irish family, immigrants who came to America in pursuit of the Dream. The O'Malley family acquired substantial wealth, but despite living in a mansion, Elena's childhood was characterised by alcoholism, abuse and humiliation (Moody, *TIS* 58). Elena has chosen to follow the same aspirational path as her parents, but is deeply discontented. Her ennui is most felt in the minor failures of her activities in the role of wife and mother: she fails to remove a pen mark on a shirt; her Thanksgiving turkey is too dry. These disappointments are ever-present reminders that her identity as an affluent suburban housewife

is not satisfying, that she is living in a 'bottomless pit of loneliness' which she can imagine deteriorating into 'real and debilitating mental illness' (67). She even compares herself unfavourably with the victims of the Cambodian genocide, so disillusioned is she with the American Dream and its 'spiritual impoverishment' (67).

The novel notes that the era is a time of 'great spiritual questioning' (Moody, *TIS* 162). The disillusioned residents of New Canaan are avid seekers of spiritual enlightenment, chasing some illumination or solution to their existential emptiness. At the key party, 'the centre of the conversation' is alternative religion, 'the Church of Scientology, the People's Temple, Gestalt therapy' and especially 'est' (162). 'est' was the very popular therapy-cum-religion established by Werner Erhard in the early 1970s, which promised unhappy Americans 'mastery in the matter of their own lives and the experience of satisfaction, fulfilment, and aliveness' (Rhinehart 134).[33] Every religious philosophy discussed at the key party is self-centred: how to get more for yourself, to acquire, to ascend. Wesley Meyers, the New Canaan Episcopalian minister, doesn't espouse traditional Christian theology, but preaches the Good News according to Werner Erhard, excitedly insisting that 'as Werner says, you are the higher power, the supreme being. YOU are' (Moody, *TIS* 163). His explication of religion focuses on 'the main issue' of 'the Fleece', and the conversants' 'right… to the fleece, to get all the fleece' (162). But the Biblical myth of the fleece isn't about acquisition: the fleece is a sign from God to the prophet Gideon to stop hoarding grain for himself during wartime—in other words to give up acquisitiveness. Myers' philosophy has more in common with the expression 'to fleece', to strip someone of all their money/possessions, usually dishonestly. The people of New Canaan, as good American suburbanites, are ostensibly Christian, but they have turned a term from the Judeo-Christian

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[33] Camilla Paglia points out that est, as a religion of individualism, worked against the Western ideals of 'meaningful politics or social structure' (Paglia 58); in Girardian terms, it is a force of internal mediation and of disorder.

Scriptural vocabulary into an aspirational American-Dream-buzzword. The novel also notes that popularised Christian religion, in its most feelgood forms, is on the ascendant: 'Godspell was a hit. Jesus Christ Superstar was a hit' (75). The spiritual crisis in New Canaan is about dissatisfaction; the role of religion is to lead its followers to satiety, to help them get everything they want to get, and be who they dream of being. Religion is not a mechanism for dealing with rivalry and violence, but rather, just another delivery system for materialities and pleasure. But for all their endeavours, the people of New Canaan sense that their community is falling into disintegration that begins to—quite literally—snowball.

As I have previously outlined, Girard notes that in mythical and tragic narrative, mimetic crisis is often symbolised by physical or environmental crisis, disease, destruction, and decay, and the contagious nature of these phenomena (Girard, *SG* 29–30). The breakdown of the *Ice Storm* community is reflected in recurring allusions to rot and decay. The gleaming homes and lawns of suburbia are described as 'decomposing Canaan parish' (Moody, *TIS* 271), located on highway I-95, which is: 'a noxious artery, more like an intestine, really, a bearer of wastes and bacteria' (195).

Jim describes his home life, behind the white columns, as 'rotten… you wouldn't believe how rotten' (Moody, *TIS* 177). In the Williamses' home, the basement is where the kids hang out, below the artificial environs of the model home above, in the felt reality of their family lives:

> The dusty packing crates full of gum were like the faceless sentries that protected some imperial decay... The basement was a neglected precinct... The Ping-Pong table sagged in the middle of the room, like a rotting sea vessel. The power tools hanging on the wall were instruments of torture. (Moody, *TIS* 42)

Both Benjamin and Elena feel powerless in the face of this continuing slide into decay. Benjamin's compulsive adultery is his capitulation to the forces that are gradually undoing his tidy life: 'He descended into vulgarity the way a buzzard locks into some morsel of decay. He gorged himself on his discomfort... His disgrace… he was doing his best to feel bad... Something led Hood these days into degradation' (Moody, *TIS* 16).

Elena initially tries to resist the communal tendency, but eventually decides that 'yes, the thing to do was to relax into this deterioration' (Moody, *TIS* 77). The wider world, too, is deteriorating into putrefaction. The novel is full of tangential asides that are references to the repellent, inviting the reader to meditate upon the bodily crevices of the Guinness-Record-holding fattest man in the world, or the 'sheer volume' of semen from daily masturbation worldwide (22, 23).

Against this backdrop of Dream and decay come the manifestations of Girardian mimetic crisis. The first, and most obvious, is the sign of undifferentiation. The novel acknowledges that the American Dream itself promotes (or alleges to promote) undifferentiation between social classes, as felt by the doormen of the building where rich Libbets Casey lives:

> These countercultural doormen knew the difference between their station and Libbets's... [but] they cherished the notion, like Libbets did, that the rich were just people, too. They could all share some dope. It was cool. (Moody, *TIS* 91)

An early event in the novel is Halloween night, which for the kids of New Canaan is a Dionysian festival of reversals and excess.[34] Girard notes that Dionysian festivals are about

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[34] Jack Santino discusses the relationship between modern American Halloween and Dionysian fertility rituals, and finds traces of 'fertility cult' rituals in modern suburban Halloween celebrations (Santino 12). He also notes that Halloween is related to harvest festivals, and as I mentioned in my analysis of *The Virgin Suicides*, harvest festivals are noted by Frazer and Girard to have sacrificial rituals at their core.

breaking down the social order and indulging in taboo acts. The rich teenagers dress up as vagrants, 'the further the distance from their cushy lives, the higher the rating' (Moody, *TIS* 20). They are drawn to the opposite of their real lives and to 'the mythology of the holiday', which reverses the acquisitive striving for more and more material gratification into a 'carnival of sleep and death' (20). Additionally, not just at Halloween but all the time, the kids all call one another 'Charles' (35) instead of their names, bonding in shared, undifferentiated identity.

Elena and Benjamin both inhabit the murky realm of undifferentiation. Elena's childhood traumas have left her unable to distinguish between 'phrases of affection and hatred', unable to 'tell one from the other', confused by the conflation of properly opposite qualities until she 'couldn't tell derision from respect, a beating from a fond hug' (Moody, *TIS* 57). Such is her basis for forming relationships. Benjamin is repeatedly associated with undifferentiation, as embodied by his prostate trouble, which 'struck the famous and unknown with the equanimity of a plague' (54); when he first meets Elena he woos her with a seductive verbal spell of undifferentiation, telling her that 'profit and loss', or 'communism and capitalism' are meaningless distinctions, that 'didn't make a bit of difference' (13).

Paul and Wendy Hood find undifferentiation in their nascent sexual experiences. Rather than sex being identity-affirming, they find it blurs boundaries and confuses identity, time and place, as 'the past and the future happen in the present moment' (Moody, *TIS* 206), and the undiscriminating passions of teen lust 'flattened out differences' (208). The adults also seek some kind of reassuring affirmation of fixed meaning from sex, but the experimental sexuality of the 1970s is born of undifferentiation and produces undifferentiation, and the novel quotes a rock critic who dubs 1973 'the year of the transsexual tramp', as ostensibly heterosexual male pop stars wear 'platform shoes and boas and blouses', and transvestites like Holly Woodlawn and Candy Darling are idolised in popular songs (184). The key party is the fruit of this growing

interest in undifferentiation, as 'the key party came into existence… among the dangerously promiscuous, those who didn't distinguish between the sexes' (109). The party-players in New Canaan are easily persuaded that 'we can do this if we want. We can bend these bonds a little bit' (244), but breaking out of the usual social bonds and rules brings about disorder. The novel depicts this experimentation with undifferentiation as problematic, insofar as it produces lack of familiar order and meaning. As the party progresses, 'the order became confused', and the novel concedes that this is 'because, in the end, it was not a game in which order had much place' (169). The players become 'unraveled, disarranged, unhinged' (250).

When Wendy hears about the key party, she immediately imagines its difference-erasing results reaching tragic proportions—in quasi-Girardian terms, she perceives the mythical connection between undifferentiation and monstrous consequences:

> What if the [key party] exceeded everyone's expectation?...She might be stepsister with the boy she loved, and stepsister, also, with his rival, whom she had once loved. She would commit incest... she would permit each of her stepbrothers to touch her... then her stepbrothers would fight to the death for the right to seed in her a two-headed baby who spoke Greek at birth... (Moody, *TIS* 248)

As the ice storm progresses, the natural world reflects not just spreading decay but a spreading undifferentiation. The rain falls with 'relentless uniformity' that erases distinctions of class and status, smothering neighbourhoods with 'less affluent tax bases' as well as 'New Canaan's wealthy' (Moody, *TIS* 50). The raging storm causes the river to overflow, and the Hoods' house is flooded, blurring the boundaries between home and the wild: 'the river had reached out to incorporate the Hoods and their residence into itself' (225). In this flurry of disorder, the news of Mike's death arrives—and it is depicted as the climatic result of his parents' retreat from the familiar world of parental roles and responsibility, their overnight venture into 'chaos' and

'disorder' (250). At the moment of Ben's arrival with the news, all is confusion: 'the door opening, and then the knock. It was all backward' (255). Wendy is overwhelmed by the sudden absence of reliable distinctions:

> She couldn't distinguish between Mike and Sandy, as she lay there on the bed. She saw Sandy in the basement with her, instead of Mike, or she suddenly believed that she had spent the night with Mike and that now Sandy was dead. Sex and death were all confused in her. Everything was confused. (Moody, *TIS* 261)

In addition to all the signs of undifferentiation, the crisis in the ice storm is also depicted in terms of virulent contagion. The language of sickness and contagion is frequent in *The Ice Storm*. Benjamin Hood is a walking collection of distasteful contagious diseases:

> …a mild case of eczema, which broke out all over his body, mostly in winter, and which turned his skin a patchy orange; piles [...]; a duodenal ulcer [...]; a swelling in his feet which he imagined was gout; a noticeable enlargement of his liver and pancreas; and canker sores [he was] a record holder among those afflicted with mouth sores... [he was] afflicted… his pox... (Moody, *TIS* 8)

The word 'pox' evokes the plague, and marks Benjamin as a carrier of pestilence. Other than Benjamin's afflictions, the rest of the infection in the novel is primarily sexual. There are numerous references to, and incidences of, masturbation, which is described as 'a falling sickness, with the emphasis, these days, on the sickness part' (Moody, *TIS* 28).[35]

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[35] This association of masturbation with sickness is of course not new, and evokes Victorian anxieties about masturbation as 'productive of disease' (Stoehr 41). Greg Tuck argues that masturbation has historically been thought of as not merely 'not-reproductive' but 'anti-reproductive', opposed to the traditional, even primitive value of fecundity. He also notes that despite the rise of sex-positive discourse in the second half of the twentieth century, masturbators in American popular culture are generally depicted as 'sad, bad or mad', 'morally bankrupt'

This notion of compulsive sexual appetite as a means of transmitting infection leads neatly to the notion of sex as the contagious bug at the key party. The key-party phenomenon is described as arriving in Fairfield County from some unknown origin, a 'Poisson Distribution' (Moody, *TIS* 110). The use of the phrase 'Poisson Distribution' seems less intended to refer to the mathematical model of that name, and more to evoke the idea of 'poison', a contaminant that spread from the city to suburbia, especially given the other contagion-metaphor for the spread of 1970s sexual permissiveness: 'The Summer of Love had migrated, in its drug-resistant strain, to the Connecticut suburbs... About the time America learned about the White House taping system' (55).

There is a connection drawn here between the larger national crisis, as symbolised by the Watergate affair, and the spread of sexual experimentation—perhaps two products of the same cause, namely relentless mimetic desire.

When Jim Williams discovers Wendy and Sandy half-naked together, he makes one of the most ironic speeches of the novel: having just gotten out of bed with Elena Hood, he blames the media for infecting the kids with sexual curiosity: "Well, obviously there's some kind of contagious quality to behaviour like this. You guys didn't get an idea this far out just by yourselves... so you must have gotten it somewhere…" (Moody, *TIS* 246).

As Jim is Benjamin's mimetic rival, it is not surprising that the moment neatly mirrors the event of the previous day, when Benjamin caught Wendy entangled with Mike. Benjamin is in the Williamses's house for sex with Janey, and with a face 'the scarlet of shame' he bellows at his

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and 'degenerate', and associated with 'insanity, social separation [and] violence' (Tuck 168, 173, 175). In Girardian terms, such qualities are of course the transgressive and marginal features of the eligible scapegoat.

daughter: 'This is just shameful, you kids, shameful' (Moody, *TIS* 47). The uncanny mirroring of each man catching the kids in bed after getting out of bed with the other man's wife is also highly reminiscent of the monstrous doubles or twins that Girard notes as a recurring theme in myth.

The Hoods and the Williamses are caught up in the machinations of the modern world of unbridled mimetic desire and contagion. The opening pages of the novel list significant modern phenomena before and since that fateful weekend: amongst the inventory of fax machines and multiplex cinemas are the rife infections of modern America: HIV/AIDS and computer viruses.

The novel is full of references to a wider atmosphere of violence and chaos spreading through the neighbourhood and nation. Benjamin feels a sense of irrational fear, 'full of dread [and] anxiety' (Moody, *TIS* 7) in response to small signs of impending disaster. The failure of the local stationery store 'filled him with dread' (7). The failure of the mom-and-pop store is a sign of the failure of the American dream, a 'Main Street' business unable to survive in the ruthless competitive environment against large corporations that annihilate their rivals. Paul, too, feels a haunting fear, the ever-present imminence of violence. A stranger on the train is ominous and terrifying: 'rapist, thought Paul, murderer' (200). At Paul's school, privileged students live with the constant possibility of violence in their families, brought on by the ennui familiar to the rich and miserable:

> There were kids at St Pete's whose parents would be removed from this very Thanksgiving table to have their stomach pumped of sleeping pills. Whose siblings

> had hanged themselves or gassed themselves or who had driven expensive cars into the ocean. (Moody, *TIS* 82)

As in *The Virgin Suicides*, there are terrifying references to news stories of wanton physical violence, creating an atmosphere of a randomised and spreading threat that may strike anyone, at any time:

> two popular locals, Walter and Joanne Parkin, their children, baby-sitter, the baby-sitter's boyfriend and her parents all murdered by a drifter from the Bronx... elsewhere in California: an Oakland school superintendent executed with cyanide bullets by an unknown terrorist organisation... (Moody, *TIS* 229)

The crisis is also felt in the economic and political spheres. The alarming fluctuations of the market, and the uncertainty of a secure economy are ever-present: 'the oil embargo... The President was pondering special powers to ration electrical resources'. Despite the newscasts' reassurances of governmental oversight and action, 'the market had plunged fifty points this week' (Moody, *TIS* 61). Watergate forms a backdrop to the events in the novel.[36] Paul is reading Nixon's biography, and is staggered by 'the enormity of this Nixonian schema', 'gulp[ing] for air' as if he is physically watching some oncoming catastrophe and unable to flee. To the 'six crises' of Nixon's biography he considers that Watergate is 'a seventh crisis', and swears in sudden panic, 'Holy shit, he said' (95). The idea of a seventh crisis fills Paul with fear. Perhaps there is some significance in the number seven, which may symbolise completeness or an epitome—the seventh crisis would be an ultimate crisis, unravelling everything.[37] Elena

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[36] *The Virgin Suicides* is also set during Watergate, though the novel leaves the reader to work that out for themselves by providing minor historical clues (Womack and Mallory-Kani 157).

[37] Numerology, as well as playing a part in ancient myth, also appears in Shakespeare's tragedies to intimate forthcoming disaster (see Hunt 228; Sokol 53), and is a recognisable tragic omen of crisis.

perceives the contagious and spreading crisis, from Watergate to local frustrations, as part of a chaotic, undifferentiated whole: 'the New York Mets and the oil crisis, Watergate and Rod Laver and Billie Jean King, and the unacceptable new rector at the Episcopalian church—all mixed up. No calamity would organise these fragments...' (123).

She senses the need for some violent event to reorganise the chaos—this is a premonition of the mechanism of the scapegoat solution, though she cannot at this point imagine what kind of event might be violent enough to fix her broken world, which is becoming more inhospitable to human life by the day, as mirrored in the increasingly hostile winter weather.

The terrible weather that worsens into an ice storm is the central thread of the novel, and the major metaphor of the narrative's movement through crisis to climax. In the very early pages of the novel, there is a hint of trouble to come: 'the weather report was bad' (Moody, *TIS* 19). The characters begin to fear for their safety, as 'the roads would be full of treachery. They would be slick and undependable' (73). News reports come rolling in, warning people to stay safely at home since the 'sudden drop in temperature' will certainly cause 'devastation' (94). There are strong echoes here of pagan myths and medieval narratives in which 'a heavy snowfall, a lengthy thunderstorm, or a great flood' (Dean 550) are signs of crisis, of moral disorder and the wrath of the gods.

But the folks of New Canaan don't want to stay at home, ensconced in their familiar structures of nuclear families and spouses. They venture out into the storm, and become part of its chaos: 'the carnal refugees from the Halfords' house… travelling out into a storm that was no longer safe' (Moody, *TIS* 175). As the men and women at the party couple up and depart together into the cold night, there is one final environmental incident that illustrates their descent into dangerous disorder: the one remaining streetlamp in the whole storm-buffeted neighbourhood 'abruptly went out' (179). The couples have left the civic order of their ordinary lives behind,

and are travelling in the dark—and bound, by implication, to crash. Elena and Jim do so, not only metaphorically but actually, Jim's car spinning out of control on the ice (178).

The description of the storm's effect on the inmates of the psychiatric facility adds to the growing sense of chaos: the psychiatric patients are described in pre-scientific terms as 'loonies', the unhinged villains of myth or Gothic nightmare, wandering in the storm, 'in the dark, with the gunfire of trees snapping all around them'. The narrator imagines them 'breaking out of [their] padded cells', and 'raiding adjacent homes' for alcohol and opiates (Moody, *TIS* 209). This description also ironically mirrors the behaviour of those at the party, who break out of their marriages in what Elena describes as 'erotic dementia' and raid adjacent homes for the opiate of adultery.

As the storm worsens, it takes on a mythic or metaphysical aspect; it is a divine force, wreaking havoc on New Canaan as the epicentre of the mimetic crisis, the crisis that invites violence and chaos. Wendy intuits that 'the whole environment… had become this one thing', a living and malicious Godlike entity that 'had selected … New Canaan as the center of His attention' (Moody, *TIS* 137). When the Hoods return to their home, the 'curse' of the storm has completely destroyed it. What was a superficially safe suburban American home is now ruined, as water is 'streaming down the walls' and every room has been 'touched by the curse of the flood' (223).

The morning after the storm, Jim and Elena pass 'the hulks of abandoned BMWs and Volvos and Volkswagens', driving slowly past 'destruction in every forest and yard' (Moody, *TIS* 230). Not just the natural environment, but the environment of material possessions, those status symbols so essential to the structure of a community like New Canaan, have been torn apart by the storm. In the same way, the previously upheld structures of marriage and family have been devastated by the night's events, and the community will not recover.

New Canaan was supposed to be the Promised Land, but instead it becomes a scene of wreckage and disappointment. I suggest that *The Ice Storm*, like *The Virgin Suicides*, depicts the American Dream as a catalyst for crisis. In both novels, the American Dream not only erases differences, but suburban culture is devoid of formal rites of passage that initiate individuals from one fixed identity to another. This is particularly important for adolescents who in Girardian terms are 'unstable' and conduits for chaos until ritual fixes their adult identity. Like *The Virgin Suicides*, *The Ice Storm* is explicit about the importance of rites of passage: 'In Samoa, and in other developing nations, adolescents went out into the woods on foot, unarmed, and didn't come back until they had learned a thing or two' (Moody, *TIS* 34).

When Wendy gets her first period, Elena's only response is to subtly leave a packet of Tampax on her daughter's pillow. The narrator contrasts this with other societies, in which first menstruation is celebrated as a formal entry into the fixed status of adulthood. But whereas if Wendy were an 'American Indian' or 'Druid girl' she would be feted with mysterious rites, hallucinogens, 'marriage feasts' including drinking her own menstrual 'effluent', her mother has no rituals to offer her: 'Elena said nothing about this or other matters' (Moody, *TIS* 132).

The characters of the novel must make do with the diluted rites of sexual experience and drug use that symbolise coming-of-age in America. Elena, forlornly going through with her resolution to have sex with Jim Williams, has 'never made love in a car before', and since 'it was one of those rites of passage that she had read about in books' (Moody, *TIS* 176), perhaps hopes it will be transformative despite its dreary physical reality. In the same way, Wendy and Sandy's night together is less about the disappointing physical facts—Sandy is too immature to be aroused—and more about going through the motions of the ritual, which Wendy correctly

compares to 'initiation' (147), a step that will help him 'move up in this matter of growing up' (147).

Perhaps the more precious for its scarcity, anything resembling ritual in New Canaan is an 'organising event' (Moody, *TIS* 237). For Wendy, her position in the social structure of her family ('Family, what a flawed system of attachment!' (11)) is organised and defined by the ritual of spanking: 'for the ass-spanking … occasions were grandly stylised, full of careful and loving ritual. Wendy's first spanking was the great organising event of her early memory...' (237).

She gains some sense of identity through this ritual—'She was Mom and Dad's little piece of ass' (Moody, *TIS* 238)—and then moves on to the rituals of taking her pants down for her peers. Her relationship with Mike starts with the 'I'll show you mine/You show me yours' routine behind the change rooms at the country club; later, she thinks of her dry-humping sessions with him as 'the ritual of their congress' (42). Elena also remembers a strange and unhappy family ritual, as her alcoholic mother went in and out of rehab. The modern American suburbs lack a formal calendar of religious rituals and festivals, replacing them with broken-down versions that are products of the failure of the Dream—in Elena's case, the annual 'drying out' and 'release' cycle of her mother's rehab admissions, which gives shape to the years 'like any annual occurrence, like a harvest or saint's day' (59).

The kids at Paul's school celebrate a diluted version of Saturnalia, throwing intoxicated parties and calling themselves the 'Cult', but eventually their rituals begin to 'sour' around the time when Paul Davenport declares himself 'King of the Cult' (Moody, *TIS* 89). As I have already mentioned, the appointment of a king during Saturnalia signals the beginning of the scapegoat-mechanism, as the king reigns briefly and is then sacrificed. Davenport is, therefore, destined for blame and expulsion, as I will later detail.

Rituals intended to reinforce the structure of gender identities are also present in subtle ways. In the social climate of middle-class white suburbia, there is still a pervasive sense of postwar gender-role ideals: 'The girls took Home Economics and the boys took Shop or else risked civic humiliation for the rest of their lives' (Moody, *TIS* 31). The key party, though it is still organised around heterosexual pairings, is about breaking the rules of marriage, and as such opens the possibility of abandoning traditional notions of gender. Once one set of rules is abandoned, others can be broken too: 'there were things still to be negotiated' (165). In the aftermath of the party, Elena and Wendy try to 'repair the situation' by reverting to primitive forms of identity, cooking breakfast in the kitchen for the men in order to 'share a notion about women', while the men's 'job' is to make a fire (240).

The Ice Storm is not a simple scapegoat-myth about a single scapegoat in a vengeful community. Rather, there are many potential scapegoats, and many moments of sacrificial violence. Although Mike is the character who finally dies, he is far from the only eligible scapegoat. The novel details the marginality of each member of the Hood family, and their acts of transgression that push them even further away from the safe centre.

Each member of the Hood family is marginal in some way. Benjamin is 'scaly and unlovable', marked for persecution with his plurality of social and physical weaknesses. He is badly dressed, and his face is ugly, 'mottled' and 'puffy', rendering him unpopular at work. He has eczema all over his body and his mouth is infested with constant weeping sores. Elena is less obviously marginal, but she feels herself to be an outsider. She feels little connection with her neighbours, their gossip or their politics, and at parties 'sought out the bores… and built with them a fortress of social insignificance' (Moody, *TIS* 157). Benjamin and Elena's decision to participate in the key party positions them on the edge of the larger community: the party is an assemblage

of fractured marriages, a epitomised assortment of New Canaan's failing community who are willing to commit a 'kind of basic Ten Commandments violation' and are therefore classified as 'the undesirable element of New Canaan' (162).

Wendy is ostracised at her school, hanging out with the marginalised 'freshmen delinquents, the adopted kids, and half-dozen working class kids, the half-dozen blacks' (Moody, *TIS* 148). She yearns for community and yet forges an identity based on transgression, shame, and blame—as when she engages in mutual oral sex with another girl at a sleepover. Having failed to find any 'sense of community that stuck deeper than the country club stuff', Wendy chooses a 'posture and activity that would most make her feel ashamed', since at least it gives her a reputation and thus a distinct identity: 'Sally Miller talked her up... Her transgression, her perversion' (134).

Paul, too, finds identity in marginality. Rejected by the cool elite of his peers, he 'had given up trying. He hung out with the stoners' (Moody, *TIS* 84), and he feels uncannily disturbed during the classic scapegoat-sequence in a Christmas television special 'during the sequence in which Rudolph was being ridiculed by the other reindeer' (82). His social group bond over their outcast status, since all they have in common is that they are 'undistinguished' (86). After masturbating against Libbets' sleeping body in her bed, Paul is horrified at his transgression: 'Was he a fool? Was he a deviant?' (189). He realises that he has 'plunged himself into the netherworld of troubled adolescents' (191), and now inhabits an even more marginal status, in which 'deviants and losers and mutants and the loveless' occupy an abject category to which he now also belongs: 'these [were] Paul Hood's people' (192). After his initial horror subsides, he concludes that he is simply 'a loser from a family of losers' (196).

By contrast, Mike's transgressions are relatively mild. He is a polite participant in sex-play with Wendy, and on the night of his death he trespasses in the Silver Meadow grounds and buildings (Moody, *TIS* 210).

The process of isolation is an important part of scapegoat-preparation, and several of the novel's characters undergo an isolation from their peers. Paul, already a 'loner', goes through a period of physical isolation alone on the broken down train: 'the night had been really, really long... Hours frigid in the dark' (Moody, *TIS* 274). Wendy has been isolated throughout her teens, condemned to 'isolation in public school', where her peers either 'turn away' from her or verbally expel her with names like 'whore and freak' (201). The teen 'loner' character is, of course, a recurring trope in stories about or for teenagers (Martinec 343), which I would argue is a modern American reworking of the marginal scapegoat-figure. Mike, too, is alone and lonely on the night of the storm; left to fend for himself by his parents who have gone to the key party, abandoning his house 'to wander the streets' he meditates on his isolation, in the certainty that his parents will not even notice that he is missing, let alone search for him in the storm, 'oh, the solitude of that moment!' (Moody, *TIS* 211).

But it is Benjamin who experiences the most overt process of isolation. It begins at his workplace: 'Hood began to be isolated within Shackley and Schwimmer not long after... Suddenly they just didn't want to hear from him at sales meetings... This was a long, slow, incremental process of isolation' (Moody, *TIS* 118).

It has been building up for a long time, as his life has become a permanent exclusion from others' attention, as emphasised by one paragraph's repeated use of the word 'lonely': 'lonely in crowds, lonely at meetings... lonely…lonely... lonely…lonely… lonely…lonely… this isolation…' (Moody, *TIS* 6). Over time, the process of isolation spreads to his social life, and 'Benjamin [is] treated with contempt' at neighbourhood events, kept outside his social group 'in isolation. Alone' (Moody, *TIS* 216).

Each member of the Hood and Williams families realises his or her own isolation, the brokenness of their community, when confronted by Mike's frozen body: 'they were all isolated in that foyer, all of them' (Moody, *TIS* 253). Mike's death has not reconciled the community, and each of them are still isolated, eligible scapegoats, potential victims of further violence.

The ideal scapegoat also has monstrous qualities, whether in extremity, duality, incorporeality, or resemblance to animals. There are minor references to monstrosity in several of the characters. There are echoes of Girard's idea of monstrous doubles in Elena's memory of standing between two mirrors to reproduce herself 'innumerably' (Moody, *TIS* 61). Paul thinks of himself as a comic book character, though his alter-ego is mostly human, except in one moment of defeat when he takes on the qualities of fire rather than humanity, 'Paul Hood, the flame, the torch, burnt out' (275). Jim Williams, on discovering Sandy and Wendy in bed together, calls them 'You two monsters' (241).

Benjamin is *the* monster of the novel, though. In the early chapters, Benjamin is described as inhuman, a kind of ghost or creature from the underworld, 'a spook, a fool, a voice from the beyond' (Moody, *TIS* 29). Later he is described in more animal terms as 'ugly, scaly, even repulsive' (64). Paul thinks of his father as a kind of monster, specifically as mutant-monster 'the Thing' from the Fantastic Four comic books. The Thing's given name before his mutation was Benjamin, and they share the qualities of being ugly, 'chunky, homely, self-pitying' (80). At the key party, Benjamin takes on the nature of a wild and terrifying animal, and his monstrosity appals onlookers, as he charges heavily around the room, grunting and stinking, 'a tusk of [saliva] protruded from his cavernous and angry mouth' (215). His monstrosity is additionally mythical because he does not resemble one animal, but is a composite of many, with reptilian scales, elephantine tusks, and the 'cavernous' mouth of a hippo or whale.

A Girardian tragedy depicts a violent or expulsive sacrifice, and *The Ice Storm* engages with this theme at multiple points. There are a few notable sacrifices in the novel, as the protagonists try desperately to eliminate rivals or catharsise themselves of crises.

Davenport, the 'King of the Cult' of Paul's social group, sets himself up as Paul's rival. The triangle of desire between Paul, Davenport and Libbets Casey grows increasingly tense, until Paul decides to trick his friend and mentor-turned- enemy into taking a tranquiliser, so that Paul may be alone with Libbets, their shared object. His decision occurs 'at some lower level of cognition. It was like the collective unconscious or something' (Moody, *TIS* 96). Paul is acting instinctively, from the 'collective unconscious'—in Girardian terms, his act is the natural unconscious impulse that follows from mimetic rivalry and crisis. Davenport, once the Saturnalian King, now lies unconscious on the floor. Paul hopes this will facilitate his possession of Libbets, and his redemption as a person through her love, but she gently rebuffs his overtures. Paul discovers, too late, that Davenport was never really the true obstacle to his satisfaction.

The most explicit sacrifice in the novel is carried out by Wendy and Sandy, when they hang his GI Joe doll with a home-made noose. The doll's electronic voice is broken, and it has become a symbol for Sandy of all his disappointment in the accumulation of expensive toys—the eleven-year-old's version of the American Dream—that fail to satisfy, and his anger against 'inferior goods and dumb culture and stupid America' (Moody, *TIS* 144). Sandy ties the noose and assembles a 'makeshift lynching apparatus' (144); Wendy tries to fix the doll, to make it speak again, but Sandy has given up hope. Having seized upon the idea of lynching the doll, Sandy refuses to entertain Wendy's suggestions that perhaps the doll isn't broken. When she pushes a button and GI Joe speaks, they are reluctant to call off the sacrifice. They dimly realise that

more than GI Joe is at stake—regardless of whether this *particular* toy works, the larger system of satisfaction-via-toys does not, and their frustration and resentment need a semi-religious purgation: 'She recognised a moment here in which she saw the machinations of chance in the universe, and she didn't want to ruin it… —Let's hang him anyway, [she said]' (145). But as the noose pulls tight, the catharsis fails to occur—the 'whole gesture didn't satisfy, really' (145). This little episode is a sort of microcosm of the whole novel, as will become apparent later in this chapter.

Wendy is a fairly eligible scapegoat herself—isolated, marginal, transgressive. When Elena is confronted with her own guilt after sex with Jim Williams, she turns on Wendy, grabbing her fiercely and dragging her through the house, and Wendy 'permitted herself to be led down the stairs', aware that she is being made a scapegoat, pulled towards an 'execution' (Moody, *TIS* 236). The punishment is swift and significant. Faced with a standoff when Wendy refuses, cursing, to drop her pants and be spanked, Elena violently assaults her with a cake of soap, forcing it into Wendy's mouth. The soap is a cleanser, intended to wash away the stain of their shared guilt, but Wendy experiences it as a poison, 'traveling in her bloodstream, clogging her liver' (242). Later, Wendy turns on herself, blaming herself obscurely for Mike's death, and cuts her wrists, but is unable to perform a complete ritual self-sacrifice. She is aware of her actions as a 'religious rite', but culturally cut off from sacrificial religion, her nervous and solitary self-harm cannot compare to the mortifications she imagines she deserves:

> It was just a scratch really, nothing like the fountain she deserved, the fountaining of blood you might get from a hair shirt, say, or from an undergarment fashioned with nails and tacks, each tipped with special preparations to attract insects and vermin. (Moody, *TIS* 262)

Mike's death is not a direct result of community violence, but it is the inevitable tragic denouement of the events set in motion by the key party. The live wire that kills Mike takes on the role of the crazed community eager for sacrifice, in its personification as it dances 'the jig of the dervish, or delirious and religious mad persons' (Moody, *TIS* 211). Mike's death is by far the most grisly moment in the novel, and arguably its sacrificial climax: 'First his face grew terribly red and he began to foam at the mouth. His teeth chattered and his hair began to cook... His hands were scorched black... He smoked from the ears and bled from the nose and mouth' (214).

However, I would argue that Mike's death is a more visceral echo of the central scapegoat-sacrifice of the novel, which occurs at the exact same time: the social execution of Benjamin Hood, the character marked for persecution from the story's beginning.

Benjamin takes a dive—literally—at the key party, where the community turn on him as the scapegoat for their collective guilt. Since he appears more obviously dissolute than they are, it is okay to be committing adultery—Benjamin, not themselves, is the source of corruption and chaos. The scornful gazes of his neighbours condemn Benjamin as the guilty one, particularly guilty of destroying communal bonds, and he feels the justness of his punishment-by-expulsion. Benjamin's *anagnorisis* is a climactic moment of regret and self-loathing: 'his *guilt—guilty* of drunkenness, of boorishness, of adultery, of forging a bad relationship with chance... *Guilty* of weakening and diluting what bonds of family remained... He was quarantined and he deserved it' (Moody, *TIS* 216 my emphasis).

When, drunk and belligerent, he trips over the coffee table and falls down heavily on the grubby shag rug, nobody makes a move to help him—instead, there is a 'whisper' of denunciation, as the assembled group observe with distaste the 'vomit on his breath', his eyes like a 'bloody foam'. They leave him to pass out in a puddle of bile. After Ben wakes up the

following morning, he understands that he has been through this 'ordeal' as punishment for his moral crimes (Moody, *TIS* 215). The novel presents this moment as self-consciously part of a narrative tradition that it just falls short of naming as tragedy: Benjamin awakes to the 'certainty' that he is in a 'modern tale [that] features ordeal and dismemberment' (215).

The morning after the key party is, in some ways, the calm after the storm. The jealousies and strivings of all of them are put aside in the wake of Mike's death. The assembled Williams and Hood families are sobered and, perhaps, chastened. Is this the communal relief and reunification of Girard's scapegoat-mechanism and myth? Evidence that such is the case would be the divinisation of the scapegoat/s, and recoherence of the fractured community.

There are some slight references to potential divinity in the earlier parts of the novel, such as Benjamin's feeling that with Janey he becomes 'masculine and magical and mystical' (Moody, *TIS* 7), or Mike's expression of worshipful reverence for Wendy when he lays boxes of chewing gum at her feet like 'one of the wise men' in a 'school Christmas pageant' (37). Paul's comic book alter ego acquires supernatural powers, a 'light in his eyes', an 'internal and eternal cosmic power raging in him' (193). But it is not really until after Mike's death, and Benjamin's 'dismemberment', that any redemption becomes possible.

The sheet that Benjamin wraps Mike in is labelled a 'shroud' (Moody, *TIS* 228), a reference to the novel's earlier description of the shroud of Turin that is displayed on television during the storm. In the act of discovering and protecting Mike's dead body, Benjamin feels himself transformed from the ugly, despicable man he was before—from tragic victim he becomes an epic hero, his 'odyssey' as 'heroic as… the epics of the past', and the experience is 'magic' (221).

After the storm, Elena senses an opportunity for redemption. She perceives two distinct possibilities: salvation following sacrifice, or the doom of temporary relief before the crisis repeats itself:

> They were all forgiven and free, unshackled, liberated to go and unravel the narratives of their lives… Elena wanted to say all this... She knew that if she didn't, she was condemned to watch the blunders of the past come around again for a revival, an encore presentation. (Moody, *TIS* 259)

Benjamin, too, reaches for redemption. Rising from the tomb of the Halfords' bathroom, Ben-the-scapegoat feels enormous relief, a sense that the crisis is over. He can now 'put it all behind him'; he feels that his 'ordeal and dismemberment' has brought about a profound shift, that not only the real storm but the metaphorical storm is over, and that 'gale that had buffeted him... was at last blowing in a good direction' (Moody, *TIS* 217). He rushes to tell Elena the good news of their second chance at life, declaring that despite their 'trouble', 'we can still work it out' (266).

When Paul arrives at the railway station, and his family are all there to meet him—the last thing he expected from this dysfunctional, selfish group—he catches a little of their renewed hope. He 'threw his arms around' his father and mother, kisses his sister, then kisses the dog (Moody, *TIS* 278). There is a moment of family togetherness. At this moment the entire Hood family are elevated to divinity by a 'sign in the sky'. This 'apotheosis' apparently makes sense of the chaotic crisis: 'And right then there was a sign in the sky. An actual sign in the sky... And it knotted together everything in that twenty-four hours... A flaming figure four....And it stayed with them all that fall, that apotheosis' (279).

However, this 'apotheosis' is a contradiction to the other facts of the novel's final pages. After the initial relief and renewed hope, the community is not redeemed. Mike's death, and Benjamin's fall, have not healed the fractures within or between the two families. Their shared shock at Mike's death is the last thing they will ever share, and the Hood and Williams families will never 'be this close' again. The sacrifices temporarily 'brought them together' but then 'inevitabl[y]', 'drove them apart' (Moody, *TIS* 259–260). The brief uptick in weather after the storm is already receding from New Canaan, after an hour or two of 'unrestrained sun', 'the temperature had dipped again', leaving them cold and shivering (271). Any neighbourly bond between the families is broken, and both couples will eventually divorce, 'spend[ing] their weekends… arranging the complexities of visitation' between their fragmented parts (271). Benjamin's high hopes come to nothing, and the novel resigns itself to 'leav[ing] Benjamin there, his 'wish for reconciliation' unfulfilled and 'bur[ied]' (279). Paul clings to the hopeful thought that 'nobody ever died, at least not forever... No closure was entire' (276), but there is an unintentional irony to his idea. The death of the scapegoat has not really 'stuck', the catharsis was incomplete and impermanent.

One of the obstacles to the community's catharsis, whether through the scapegoat-mechanism or through acceptance of fault, is their prevarication about placing the blame for Mike's death. Benjamin and Elena have a fight about whether the adults should 'feel bad' about being in each other's beds while Mike was dying. Benjamin is determined to be at peace, arguing that worrying about culpability is just meaningless 'second guessing', which is 'baloney' (Moody, *TIS* 264). Elena counters that Benjamin is being 'high and mighty' because he was passed out, not participating in the night's sexual acts, and mocks his assertion that his 'conscience is clear' (264). Benjamin admits that his drunkenness was an equally irresponsible choice that left the kids unsupervised, but he still believes that Mike's death has some redemptive power. He tries to convince Elena that the tragedy of Mike's death 'ought to make it plain, you know, what a

family ought to be', and he is ready to 'make a new start' (266). Significantly, Benjamin realises that the redemption is about more than a renewed commitment to their marriage—it is about reinstating community structures and familial bonds:

> …for someone who's always made a lot of noise about community, about the community of the Unitarian goddam faith … all that community of overpriced mental-health quackery, you don't seem to have a lot of concern for this community right here … (Moody, *TIS* 266)

But Elena sees the community of their family, as well as that of their neighbourhood, as irredeemably broken, and her resentment of Janey and Jim has not been supernaturally erased despite her partial acceptance of her own guilt. So the characters are stuck, unable to fully accept their own guilt for the breakdown of their community, as they continue to blame one another and cannot recohere. Mike, though dead, is obviously not to blame for their troubles. Benjamin is arguably the true scapegoat of the story but his 'death' was, perhaps, insufficient, at least for Elena—he is already back, a pestilent presence, and she sees no light of divinity in him. The fumblings and failings of the story's closing moments, then, sit at odds with the apotheotic vision of the narrator, who finally reveals himself to be Paul Hood.

In Girardian terms, the story has been neither myth nor anti-myth, but a muffled and complicated intertwining of both, reaching no certain denouement. Does this, then, mean that the novel is not performing a tragic function? In order to consider this I turn to another telling of this story: its adaptation to film. By comparing the *Ice Storm*'s treatment in adaptation, I

intend to show the difference between the novel's persistent engagement with the tragic, and the film's lack of the same.[38]

The film adaptation of *The Ice Storm* by director Ang Lee was released in 1997, with Moody involved as consultant. Moody has written about his experience of the film adaptation, and made this comment: 'When I saw the final cut... the story before me was so removed from my own imagining that it was no longer necessary to think of it as my own.' (Moody, "Creature" 290)

While he praised Lee's film highly, Moody considered the film a very separate, and different, work from his own novel. One of the key differences Moody noticed was an aesthetic difference between his imagined characters and the actors who played those roles in the film:

> What I took away … was how beautiful everyone in the movie was. Of course, this had nothing to do with the book. The characters in the book looked like real people. They had bad skin, multiple canker sores, glasses. They were puffy, they didn't exercise enough. These actors, on the other hand, were beautiful … Sometimes I was irritated by all this beauty, since it didn't seem to have anything to do with my vision … (Moody, "Creature" 291)

I hope to take Moody's observations further by noting some of the differences between the book and the film—particularly of aesthetics but also of plot, characterisation, and dialogue.

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[38] There have also been film adaptations of *The Virgin Suicides* and *Revolutionary Road*, by Sofia Coppola (1999) and Sam Mendes (2009) respectively. However, neither of these films make such radical changes to the treatment of those Girardian crisis-symptoms that I find in Lee's film; therefore I have paid particular attention to Lee's film in this thesis.

Observation of these will, I argue, suggest that such alterations reveal fundamental differences in the tragic function of the film text compared to that of the novel, in turn shining light on the ways in which the novel deploys tragic tropes in a much richer exploration of tragic tension.

Desire in the Lee's *Ice Storm* is not depicted as particularly mimetic. Where the novel is explicit about Benjamin's envy of Jim Carver, the film barely touches the subject. There is one brief moment of insincerity as Ben feigns pleasure at hearing of Jim's latest financial success, but the film is fairly opaque about the motives behind Ben and Janey's affair. Benjamin says, 'We're having an affair. Right. An explicitly sexual relationship. Your needs, my needs' (Lee 21:00);[39] and while the film might suggest that Benjamin's 'needs' are more than sexual—for someone to talk to about his job, for instance—there is little suggestion that his desire for Janey is rooted in imitation of her husband.

Ben is also shown as having rivalrous feelings toward his colleague, George Clair, but again this isn't given much treatment in the film. In one scene, Ben watches with resentment as Clair pitches a popular idea at a work meeting; later, in bed with Janey, he complains about the way Clair also beats him at company golf matches: 'I bet the entirety of his disposable income has been dedicated to humiliating me on the golf course' (20:50). There is no hint of the novel-Clair's driving ambition to actually take Benjamin's place at the company.

The world of the adolescents, in the film, contains hints of mimetic desire. Mike and Sandy Carver secretly watch their parents' dinner parties, eating leftovers and drinking wine in the kitchen, in imitation of the forbidden adult world (11:35). Sandy stares at Wendy Hood with obsessive fascination (28:00), perhaps made more powerful by the fact that he suspects (rightly)

[39] Henceforth timestamps are noted parenthetically after each reference to the film.

that she and Mike have been meeting for regular make-out sessions in the woods. And Paul Hood is advised by a schoolmate not to tell Francis Davenport about his latest crush: 'since he sleeps with every girl you ever show an interest in, why don't you keep your Libbets fixation from him?' (5:36). But the novel dwells at length on the mimetic competition driving the Paul-Davenport relationship; the film goes no further than an offhand comment about rivalry over girls.

It is clear that the mimetic nature of desire is not dwelt upon by the film. What about the next element of a Girardian tragedy: the symptoms of mimetic crisis?

The film contains occasional references to disease and destruction, for instance, after dinner at the Carvers's, Ben complains to Elena that his chicken drumstick 'was still frozen' and mumbles something about potential 'disease' (12:32). Sandy Hood enjoys destroying things: he blows up his toys with firecrackers, and then attacks an attractive potted flowering shrub with a stockwhip, stripping the foliage from the only living and vibrant plant in a landscape of bare-timbered trees and snow (30:52; 32:18).

Mike Carver gives a presentation in class about 'molecules,' the film's most explicit reference to contagious disease:

> So when you smell something bad it's like, in a way, you're eating it. This is why you should not really smell things, in the same way you don't eat everything in the world around you, because, as a smell, it gets inside of you. So, the next time you go into the bathroom after someone else has been there, remember what kind of molecules you are, in fact, eating. (1:08:06)

This speech is not in the novel, and its contribution to the film is, in part, to suggest an atmosphere of disease and potential contagion. However, the effect of this speech is also clearly humorous—a blackly comedic scene that captures the awkwardness of high school in the clash between Mike's earnest interest in science and the inappropriateness of what he's saying. By contrast, the novel is so heavy with the weight of references to disease and waste that one almost feels a desire to disinfect the pages.

The notion of contagion, too, is treated differently. In the novel, Benjamin Hood is a walking collection of distasteful diseases; various sexual activities are described as contagious (the key party, Sandy and Wendy's experimentations); and Elena attempts to curb Wendy's rebellion by literally disinfecting her with soap. None of this appears in the film. While the novel seethes with images of weeping sores, rotten timbers, and soiled undergarments, the film is visually resplendent with shiny American cars with bench seats, colourful plastic kitchenware, and shoulder-to-shoulder lapels.

The Ice Storm, both in film and in novel form, centres on the event of the key party and the potential moral transgressions therein. But the novel goes much further in making its characters transgressive, marginal, imminent victims of a crisis. The Wendy Hood of the novel forges an identity based on transgression, shame, and blame (Moody, *TIS* 134). In the film, Wendy is portrayed as a sassy small-time rebel, stealing the occasional candy bar, a teenage girl curious about sex and boys who kisses Mike and plays 'I'll show you mine' with Sandy (34:18)—encounters that are marked by shyness and giggling. This attitude of curious-but-naive adolescent banter about sex is also present in another scene, in which Wendy is asked by a classmate if there's any truth to a rumour that she 'licked Dave Brewster's weenie,' a charge she laughingly denies, and the film offers no suggestion that she is lying (16:15). The Carver's basement, which in the novel is a dusty, dingy underworld of 'decay' and 'neglect,' (42) in the

film is clean and colourful, and Wendy and Mike's trysts there are again a humorous snapshot of adolescence in the 1970s rather than evidence of Girardian crisis (46:25–47:12).

The film also excludes much of the transgressive behaviour of Wendy's brother Paul that appears in the novel, and in one case actively reverses the character's choice: when he is finally alone with his crush, Libbets Casey. Instead of pawing at Libbets's unconscious body, becoming a 'deviant', film-Paul does not cross that transgressive line. In the film, Paul and Libbets are talking when suddenly she slumps forward and passes out into his lap, her face buried in his crotch. The camera angles and editing point up the humour of the moment, framing Libbets as she topples, then framing Paul's lap from above with her head between his legs, and then his astonished face (1:18:21). For a moment, he is stunned. The film cuts to another scene (Wendy and Sandy together), leaving the viewer uncertain—perhaps vaguely worried—about what Paul is going to do next, although there have been no indications that his intentions are sinister. In the next scene, after no apparent lapse of time, we see Paul carefully and caringly (if awkwardly) lifting Libbets off his lap and lowering her to the floor. He tenderly touches her face for a brief moment, and then leaves the house.

The Benjamin Hood of Lee's film is not a particularly appealing character—he is an ineffectual father and an unfaithful husband—but he is nevertheless handsome and self-assured, deep-voiced and well-dressed (50:20–51:17), far from the bad-skinned loser and eventual drunken and disgusting monster of Moody's novel, whose physical faults are dwelt upon at length.

There are two brief and original additions to the film—items not in the novel—that treat the theme that transgressors deserve punishment. The first is very early in the film, as Wendy watches Richard Nixon speaking on television: she makes the offhand remark, 'He should be shot... he's a liar' (8:00). Her family make no reaction to this statement. Later, though, the figure of Nixon reappears as Wendy puts on a rubber Nixon mask before lying down on the

basement floor to make out with Mike. The visual image of teenage Mike thrusting desperately against a prone body with a large Nixon head is obviously humorous, and contributes to the film's rich 1970s imagery that connects the character's experiences so deeply to their historical moment. But the idea of Nixon as a transgressor, deserving of punishment, is not revisited.

The second addition is a scene in which Elena steals some lipsticks from a chemist store (29:09). While both the novel and film depict Wendy shoplifting, the film adds this scene of Elena stealing from the same store as the one Wendy stole from. There are some intentional echoes between mother and daughter here (Elena even rides Wendy's bike, in imitation of her, to the store), and these are perhaps intended to imply that Elena was once a bored teenager like Wendy, shoplifting for thrills, and that one day Wendy will be a bored suburban wife like Elena. A scrupulous Girardian reading might even find the idea of monstrous doubles here, a symptom of mimetic crisis. However, the scene does not imply that Elena deserves blame or punishment. As she coasts down the hill on the bicycle, smiling, her hair blowing in the breeze, Elena seems a much more sympathetic figure than the pursed-lipped housewife we have seen so far. When the chemist, catching Elena shoplifting, moves to confront her, the camera seems to share the viewer's sympathetic dismay and moves a discreet distance away from Elena's ensuing humiliation: panning away, out of the store, the viewer sees only dim figures behind glass doors.

In all these ways, the film omits one characteristic feature of the novel: characters committing significant moral transgressions, which mark them as eligible scapegoats whose *hamartia* has set the tragic momentum into motion. Finally, when it comes to sacrificial violence, the film once again rejects the novel's grimy and visceral focus in favour of cleaner and prettier depictions.

In both film and novel, teenage Mike is electrocuted by a power line downed by an ice storm. In the film, the scene is stark, but not distasteful. It is a crisp, dark, empty night. As the power

line snaps and falls onto the metal guard rail, upon which Mike is sitting, his face doesn't register much expression—perhaps he is mesmerized, realizing what is happening but too slow to react. Then the camera switches, once again to a more discreet angle and distance, and we see Mike topple silently onto the road (1:34:23). The death scene is peaceful, even picturesque. By contrast, in the novel, Mike's death is a violent act of sacrifice.

Benjamin's analogous experience of being the sacrificial victim is also treated very differently in the film. When Janey deliberately avoids Ben's keys in the bowl, and selects the keys of another man (also not her husband), Ben's drunken reaction is to blurt out 'No, no,' and move toward Janey, tripping and falling onto the floor while the neighbours look on in disgust. The film version retains the basic plot point but alters the atmosphere. Benjamin does react, but his 'No, no,' is a debonair murmur, and his fall a brief stumble. The group reaction is embarrassed and awkward, but not condemning; his friends move quickly to take his arms and help him to his feet with cries of, 'You okay?—He's okay, he'll be okay—You okay?' (1:23:15). There are no close-ups of his face, or of anyone else's, to suggest strong emotion or dramatic climax; there's comedy in the inappropriateness of his sudden reaction, and then the scene is played with plenty of time and space for the awkwardness to develop, as the men help Ben to his feet and toward the bathroom. It is not a pleasant scene, but it is a far cry from what the Benjamin of Moody's novel later describes as an 'ordeal and dismemberment' (Moody, *TIS* 215).

The physical attractiveness of the characters in the film, remarked upon by Rick Moody, may just be a symptom of the kind of smooth and charismatic faces possessed by much of the acting profession. But the film goes further than simply casting attractive people in the story when it depicts sexual acts between the characters, scenes that don't appear in the novel. There is a passionate kiss between Ben and Elena in their kitchen (37:23), and a sex scene between Ben and Janey in her spare bedroom. The sex scene, especially, is classic modern Hollywood:

soft lighting, smooth skin, warm tones (20:21). Both the kissing scene and the sex scene present Benjamin, Elena and Janey as attractive and desirable, inviting the viewer to envy their experience.

The experiences of the characters in the novel are almost universally unenviable—for instance, Ben's experience in Janey's spare room bed is a lonely ordeal of waiting until he realizes she's deliberately stood him up. Thanksgiving dinner, which does not appear in the novel, is included in the film—admittedly as a fairly bland ritual of abundant food and familial awkwardness (41:58), but at least a kind of tableau of American family togetherness. In the film, Paul comes home for Thanksgiving (38:06) and seems to be glad (or at least relieved) to see his sister and parents, despite their inability to communicate; in the novel, Paul is isolated at school and on the icebound train, and doesn't make it home until the final pages. So while the novel and the film share a common major plot, the characters in the film are having a much nicer time in between the major events, flirting with their good-looking partners and neighbours, hanging out with their siblings, having satisfying sex and delicious dinners.

The trailer of Ang Lee's *Ice Storm* begins with the words 'Once there was a time...,' ("The Ice Storm - Official Trailer [1997]") and paints a picture of family life something like the quirky, lovable American dysfunctionality depicted in television shows like *The Wonder Years*. While it is unlikely that Ang Lee directed the trailer himself (it is loaded with the saccharine sameness of big-studio trailers—in this case Fox Searchlight), the trailer does capture some of the atmosphere of the film. When the key party is introduced, the music changes to an upbeat, funky tune, hinting at the thrill of sexual experimentation. The voiceover murmurs that 'It was 1973, and the climate was changing.' The film is pitched as a nostalgia piece for the 1970s, with hints of the dark, wild night (brief shots of a car skidding, ice on the trees, the sparking live wire) that will frame the drama's climax. The voiceover promises that 'one winter's weekend

they would discover something that would change their lives forever'. What the something *is* that they discover is not entirely clear, but there's a sense that each character is engaged in some meaningful personal exploration. So the film is a story of discovery: the characters go through these dramatic events and gain insight about themselves, and their place in family and community.

Ang Lee's *Ice Storm* is not a tragedy. There is no community threatened by crisis and contagion. There are no monstrous scapegoats. In fact, nobody is guilty. Where Rick Moody's novel deviates from the classic tragic structure by painting everybody with the muddy brush of guilt, Ang Lee's film deviates in the opposite way: there is no crisis and nobody is to blame. The characters do not commit the fatal errors of *hamartia*; rather, their actions are amusing *faux pas*, socially awkward but ultimately unimportant. The alienation of teenagers from parents, spouses from one another, envy and hostility between neighbours, the disorder of the night of adultery—these are not crises. They are the 'changing climate' of the modern world, and the film is the story of the characters' fumblings and failings as they learn to navigate it. Mike's death is the collateral damage of this process, and in their shock and grief the characters are sentimentally reminded of their foundational affection for one another, which has perhaps been lost beneath headier distractions.

I have argued throughout this thesis that modern narratives may play with the conventions of tragedy in order to engage with the 'complex interaction' between awareness of the scapegoat's innocence and the impulse toward sacrifice and catharsis. But in order to explore this tension, a text must present at least part of the problem: the mimetic nature of desire, and the ensuing crisis in which a troubled community seeks scapegoat relief. Ang Lee's film, however, pays little attention to either mimetic desire or crisis. It could be argued that in adapting a novel to film, much detail must be cut away because of the limitations of time. However, it is not just the

film's omission of time-consuming but admittedly inessential plot events (such as Wendy's school sleepover or Paul's hiatus on the train) that contribute to what I think is a serious change of effect in the film. The film elides the mimetic nature of desire at the heart of the crisis. The symptoms of mimetic crisis—the novel's pervasive atmosphere of filth, rot, and contagion—are replaced by an atmosphere of nostalgic fondness for the characters and their lives. In removing the problem of mimetic desire and crisis, Ang Lee removes the need for a scapegoat altogether, and thus takes the film out of the realm of tragedy.

By contrast, Moody's novel engages repeatedly with the above tragic and Girardian tropes. Paul's narratorial ambivalence about almost everything—from his own desires to the guilt of his sacrificed father to the efficacy of the catharsis—may leave the reader, along with Paul, uncertain and unresolved, but we have experienced an essentially tragic narrative. The novel is almost overburdened with references to imitative desire, crisis, contagion, decay, and so forth, while also presenting each of its characters as occasionally sympathetic—oscillating between the classical-tragic imperative of catharsis, and the anti-tragic tendency towards acquitting the victim. Like the narrators of *The Virgin Suicides*, who sighed 'we are certain only of the insufficiency of explanations…this is all a chasing after the wind' (Eugenides 241), the narrator of *The Ice Storm* shies away from stable conclusions.

There is a brief anecdote in the middle of the novel: a report that a thuggish classmate of Paul's sexually assaulted a disabled girl in the school toilets. Unable to untangle the punitive and violent threads in this horrific incident, Paul 'went over the story again and again' but cannot make sense of it, and concludes that it is 'a story that didn't lead anywhere. Just something that happened' (Moody, *TIS* 202). In a similar way, *The Ice Storm,* narrated by Paul, goes over its material in meticulous detail, but never reaches a sure conclusion. The final apotheosis, Paul

admits, may only exist in his imagination, and 'after twenty years' of reflection 'it's time' for him to simply let the story go: it was just something that happened.

Benjamin Hood is unlike the Lisbon sisters in that he is depicted as committing genuinely destructive acts that *do* contribute to the breakdown of his community. In this sense he is like Sophocles' Oedipus, who *does* in the text kill his father and sleep with his mother. In both *The Ice Storm* and *Oedipus Rex*, the crisis is mythically exaggerated and depicted in terms of environmental crisis as well as moral transgression and social instability. But in *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard suggests that Sophocles is playing a double game: by assigning so much blame to Oedipus, and marking him with so many of the symbols of scapegoat-hood (i.e. foreignness, transgression, monstrosity), the text may cast doubt on its own veracity by protesting too much (Girard, *VS* 78). Mythical seriousness borders on the absurd and nearly undoes itself.

For Girard, Sophocles was unable to fully undermine the scapegoat-mechanism because he was working within a culture with a 'mythological framework' and struggled to operate outside of it; he did, however, load *Oedipus Rex* with 'elusive tragic subversion' which 'challenges the basis of the myth' in 'muted and devious fashion' (Girard, *VS* 78).[40] I suggest that something like this is occurring in *The Ice Storm*; the text's ambivalence is a result, not of any doubt as to the evidence of Benjamin's *hamartia*, but because his monstrosity is almost too absurd to give credibility to. Just as in *The Virgin Suicides*, I would argue that the sheer weight of tragic touchstones in this text forces the reader to resist Paul's resignation and instead to stay in that place of contemplation, going 'over the story again and again' (Moody, *TIS* 202), in what Girard has called a 'profound reflection… regarding the ethical demands that a revelation of victimage and its refusal places upon human beings' (Girard, "Mimesis" 17). While *The Ice Storm* itself

[40] Though, as I have already mentioned, Girard later decided that with *Antigone*, Sophocles went beyond his mythical constraints and wrote an anti-tragedy (Girard, *SG* 199).

ultimately refuses to pick a side, the pattern of mythical themes that evoke other tales of sacrifice, including anti-myths, allows the reader to resist the tragic momentum.

In my next chapter I turn to a third novel that follows a similar pattern of tragic narrative and climactic sacrifice, but which concludes with less ambivalence, and a more obvious position vis-à-vis the fate of its suffering scapegoat.

5. Revolutionary Road: Plays and Failures

Richard Yates's 1961 novel *Revolutionary Road* has garnered little attention from literary critics, though a few articles have been published in the past decade, concurrent with Sam Mendes's film adaptation and the republication of the novel by Vintage Press.

Existing criticism has focused on the problem of masculinity in the novel, in the context of 1950s cultural notions about gender roles. Michael P. Moreno's 'Consuming the Frontier Illusion: The Construction of Suburban Masculinity in Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*' describes the novel as a 'crystalline snapshot of [a] new Cold War national order', depicting the 'awkward negotiation in the mid-1950s social terrain' by men who had returned from World War II, terrain in which 'the societal attributes of compliance and progress would be battled domestically in the new suburban trenches' (Moreno 90). Moreno's reading also examines gender issues in *Revolutionary Road*, considering some notions of 1950s femininity via the work of Betty Friedan and Susan Faludi, but his analysis focuses mainly on the 'crisis of masculinity' experienced by Frank Wheeler (90). This crisis is experienced in suburbia, home of the American Dream, and a site which Moreno describes as 'the genesis of the modern consumer identity and the landscape of imminent death for the American male' (93). The 'masculinity-in-crisis' theme has also been explored by Claudia Falk, who argues that masculinity is portrayed in the novel as 'masculinity-in-relation', defined though 'differentiation and contrast' to women and effeminate men (Falk 67). She suggests that the self-perceptions of the characters in the novel are 'fraught with tensions and contradictions' that are a direct result of the social pressures of mid-century American society, as it grappled with the post-war instability of gender-essentialist notions, an 'undermining' that threatened 'a crisis of the traditional gender order' (67). These themes are also echoed by Nick James in his review of the 2008 film adaptation of the novel. James describes the story's leitmotif as 'the canker at the heart of the

American dream', and praises Yates for his ability to 'identify so perfectly the knot of 1950s social assumptions and how intricately they hang you up' (James 18).

My proposed reading of *Revolutionary Road* through the lens of Girardian theory is connected to these critical observations about the American Dream, differentiation, gender identity, and social pressures. If, as I have argued, the American Dream is by its nature a catalyst for mimetic crisis, then the Wheeler's story of aspirational desire, crisis, and violence is ripe for Girardian analysis. I want first to establish that *Revolutionary Road* is a narrative with the hallmark features of Girard's pattern of tragedy: a narrative depicting protagonists caught in mimetic desire, which leads to rivalry and crisis, a crisis interrupted by an act of violence against a scapegoat. I will then consider where to classify *Revolutionary Road* in relation to the terms 'tragic' and 'anti-tragic' I have already established; I will also discuss the self-consciousness of *Revolutionary Road* as regards plays, stages and play-acting, and how this reflexivity might function as an anti-tragic force. I begin, then, with the depiction of mimetic desire in the novel, as the beginning-point of the Girardian tragic narrative.

Revolutionary Road is set in 1955, in Connecticut suburbia. Frank and April Wheeler are a young couple with two small children who have moved to the suburbs and are struggling with notions of identity and meaning. The gradual dissolution of their relationship forms the plot arc of the novel, set against the backdrop of their affluent suburban community with its polished veneer and murky depths. Both Frank and April are trapped in mimetic desire. Girard says that mimetic desire is never for the object itself, but rather a sign of ontological insecurity. The object, according to Girard, is not what is really desired: 'the object is only a means of reaching the mediator. The desire is aimed at [acquiring] the mediator's *being*' (Girard, *DDN* 53). The subject senses an ontological emptiness in himself, a lack of identity, a sense of being the only one excluded from the fraternity of humankind. Girard quotes Gaultier's analysis of

'Bovaryism' as 'an essential lack... that being *nothing* by themselves, they [may] become *something* [by imitation]' (qtd in 53 emphasis original). The subject 'expects his being to be radically changed by the act of possession' (53).

Frank has always been wracked with insecurity and has tried to find identity by imitation, to acquire being by the act of possession, and the most powerful subject-mediator relationship of Frank's life is his boyhood with his father. His early memories of his father are admiration and envy—of the strength of his hands, his 'aura of mastery', and the desirable objects of his manly life: his woodworking tools, his shotgun, and above all 'the creaking pigskin handle of his salesman's briefcase' which 'sometimes after supper [Frank] would saunter manfully up to [and] pretend it was his own' (Yates 37).

This pretence is key to Frank's sense of identity—this mimetic copying of his model whom he hopes to become by imitation. Frank is named after his father and wants to be a literal second Frank Wheeler, to *be* his father and model. The high point of Frank's young life is a visit to the city, to see the wonderful world of his father's work. Little Frank cannot keep his eyes from his reflection in the glass windows, 'watching himself' in his outfit which is 'almost exactly like his father's', he is enthralled by the bright image of the two of them, man and boy' (Yates 74).

Frank seems on track to become a second copy of his father. But Frank Senior eventually rejects his son as an inept inheritor of his name, and Frank reacts by rebelling against everything associated with his once-adored model: 'who wanted to be a dopey salesman in the first place, acting like a big deal with a briefcase full of boring catalogues, talking about machines all day to a bunch of dumb executives with cigars?' (Yates 38).

There are strong, presumably deliberate echoes of *Death of a Salesman* here. The image of the American salesman in his felt hat with briefcase and catalogues, successful businessman and

doting father-figure, conjures Willy Loman. Like Willy, Frank Senior's career stalled and he failed to gain an important promotion, gradually fading from the ranks of success and becoming a 'dreary, querulous old fool' (Yates 38). Frank Junior embodies echoes of Biff Loman, the supposedly-brilliant son who is in fact an ordinary, perhaps slightly gifted, young man. Unlike Biff Loman, however, Frank only ostensibly rejects his father's values and remains trapped by the mimetic vision of himself as a successful man of the world.

When he fails to successfully imitate his father, Frank moves on to other models, as far removed from his father as possible: the homeless, itinerant workers of the 1930s. He fantasises about acquiring clothing like theirs and thus becoming one of them: he imagines how he will 'handle himself' in fights, and carefully assembles a mental list of the 'Levi jacket', 'work shoes with steel caps', and 'an old felt hat of his father's' that he will need to play the part (Yates 18). Later—in the Army and at college—Frank jumps to yet another set of models, this time his sophisticated, intellectual older male acquaintances who are 'relaxed in their worldliness' (21). Although his college grades are 'average', he is admired for his style in the 'beery, all-night talks that had begun to form around him' (21), and acquires a reputation as a brilliant thinker. His peers predict a prestigious career for Frank, an arcane but eminent position 'somewhere "in the humanities" [that] would involve his early and permanent withdrawal to Europe' (22).

Frank mimetically styles himself through college as an artistic intellectual, a man of talent fated to escape the pragmatic clutches of American industry and instead to distinguish himself as a Renaissance Man. But the fact is that Frank is not particularly intelligent, though he has a gift for the kind of impassioned rhetoric popular with college students. However, having committed himself to the mimetic imitation of his sophisticated heroes, he develops ideals and fantasies in keeping with the role. He works steadily on this imitation, and considers the crowning accessory for his ideal identity to be a 'first-rate' girl (23)—the attainment of which

would be an 'unalloyed triumph' (23). The girl is the ultimate object of desire, and to possess her is to attain the fantasy of *being* the mediator. Of course, Frank 'expects his being to be radically changed by the act of possession' (Girard, *DDN* 53), and Girardian theory predicts that when this transformation does not take place the subject's ire and desperation will be severe—an inevitability the novel will later depict. However, initially Frank and April believe they have found exactly what they desire in each other.

When Frank meets April at a party, and successfully seduces her, he feels he has found the perfect girl to cast in the role of his wife. She is beautiful and intelligent, and best of all (though Frank is of course unaware of this) hopelessly unsure of her own identity, and full of mimetic aspiration to attain the being of *her* mediators. As April says later,

> "I still had this idea that there was a whole world of marvelous golden people somewhere, as far ahead of me as the seniors at Rye when I was in sixth grade … heroic super-people, all of them beautiful and witty and calm and kind, and I always imagined that when I did find them I'd suddenly know that I belonged among them, that I was one of them, that I'd been meant to be one of them all along..." (Yates 272)

This passage is a haunting description of mimetic desire, and it is a keystone to the events of the novel, as its plot is entirely driven by the profoundly mimetic natures of its two protagonists. Abandoned in infancy by her wealthy parents to the care of indifferent relatives, young April idolised her parents just as Frank idolised his father. Her parents' occasional visits—brief and glamorous, dispensing gifts and compliments—seem like visitations from another world, and they punctuate the mediocre misery of her young life (324). April is raised in a perpetual state of mimetic longing; she refuses to accept the perceived dullness of her life and she casts herself as an ugly duckling fated to become a swan. She constructs an imagined world of models who are simultaneously far above her and yet where she belongs. As Frank is

the rising star of the university scene, April is drawn to him as 'the most interesting man I've ever met' (25), that is, one of the golden people, and one who can draw her into his golden world. He is the kind of man that her imagined mediator, a golden girl, would possess.

They enjoy a passionate courtship, and then marry. Unfortunately April soon falls pregnant, and Frank has to go out and get a job. He is adamant that this job will not be a gateway into mediocrity. He claims that for this reason he wants the dullest job possible, so as to preserve his sense of destiny for greater things—for attaining his mimetic desires. His job will be 'something that can't possibly touch [him]', allowing him to 'retain [his] own identity' (78). Frank takes a job at Knox Business Machines, which is in fact the company his now-deceased father worked for. There is some complicated mimetic manoeuvring going on here. Having ostensibly rejected his father's values, Frank takes a kind of delight in subverting the stereotype of the business man, fleeing the office each day to a home full of symbols of bohemia: 'cigarettes and candlewax and tangerine peel' and most importantly 'a beautiful, disheveled girl'. Frank prizes April because she is a perfect prop in this *mis-en-scéne*, 'as totally unlike the wife of a Knox man as the apartment was unlike a Knox man's home' (80).

Frank's rivalry with his father illustrates the difference between a Freudian and a Girardian reading of father-son rivalry. Girard has criticised Freud for having an initial insight into mimetic desire, but abandoning it in favour of a 'libidinal' theory. He quotes Freud's words, 'A little boy will exhibit a special interest in his father; he would like to grow like and be like him, and *take his place everywhere*' (Girard, *VS* 182 emphasis original); Frank Junior's emulation of his father, his admiration of the two of them in the shop window, is a textbook illustration of this. Girard argues that the boy takes his father as a mimetic model, and thus the father directs the boy's attention to 'desirable objects' including his own mother. However, Freud formulates the Oedipus complex as arising from sexual desire for the mother, rather than imitation of the

father: 'instead of presenting [Oedipal desire] as a consequence of the boy's first identification with the father, Freud inverts the order of the phenomena, thereby formally rejecting the cause-and-effect relationship' (184). For Girard, the mother is simply one of a number of 'desirable objects' that the father-mediator points towards, and the subject will desire all such objects with the same ferocity, whether his own mother or a leather briefcase and felt hat. The son's admiration and envy of the father is the crucial subject-mediator relationship.

Frank is still defining himself in competition with his mediator-rival-father, holding himself up next to his ghostly model and triumphing in his declared superiority. Yet for all his rebellious posturing, Frank has continued to follow in his father's footsteps. Like *The Ice Storm*'s Benjamin Hood, he 'conceals from himself all thought of motive' (Moody 83). Mimetic desire, and the fantasy of acquiring the mediator's identity by imitation of the mediator and possession of the coveted object, is at the heart of Frank and April's life and marriage. The novel thus meets the first requirement of a Girardian tragedy: the depiction of a community steeped in mimetic desire.

The arrival of a second child prompts Frank and April to move to the suburbs. It then becomes necessary to construct their identities in relationship to suburbia on the same lines as Frank's relationship to his job: exiles in the wilderness, they 'retain their own identity', their environment 'can't possibly touch' their true selves (Yates 78).

The Wheelers are introduced to Revolutionary Road by Mrs Helen Givings, a local realtor who helps the Wheelers find their home. Mrs Givings is proud to live in 'one of the few authentic pre-Revolutionary dwellings left in the district, flanked by two of the few remaining wineglass elms' (162), and she finds identity and sanctuary in the trappings of classic American

domesticity, objects that she associates with her 'sentimental' models, including the 'clean scent of cedar and floorwax', a Currier and Ives print and a 'charming old umbrella stand' (162). Mrs Givings's pleasure in her environment is mediated by the nostalgic ideal of her childhood: a softly glowing remembered America with 'clean and ample' kitchens and 'tall windows' (162). Possessing such objects of desire pleases her, as a successful imitation of her remembered model home. She is comforted by what one architectural observer has called 'confidence in the present and future [vested] in a highly edited (re)presentation of the past', a 'myth of timelessness [that is] sacrosanct' (MacBurnie 133). When the Wheelers are shown through their future home by Mrs Givings, they catch some of her enthusiasm for the seeming perfection of such a model domestic space: 'The gathering disorder of their lives might still be sorted out and made to fit these rooms, among these trees… Who could be frightened in as wide and bright, as clean and quiet a house as this?' (Yates 31).

To Frank and April's inner entourage of imagined mediators is added the notion of a model who is without 'disorder', associated with what is 'clean', and 'quiet': in Girardian terms, the very opposite qualities of mimetic crisis. Mimetic crisis is a crisis of disorder, undifferentiation run wild to the point of meaninglessness, chaos accompanied by filth, plague and contagion (Girard, *VS* 60). The affluent calm of Connecticut suburbia seems to promise some protection against such a crisis, and Frank and April feel their need for such protection.

As a community of mimetic-desirers, it is of crucial importance for each Revolutionary-Road-dweller to feel that he or she is superior to his or her neighbours—further up the stratified ladder of the American Dream, a mimetic ideal I have already discussed. Mrs Givings feels superior to the working class people down the hill—'these little cinder-blocky, pickup-trucky places—plumbers, carpenters, little local people of that sort,' (Yates 30) and to the *nouveau riche* in the new housing estates nearby—'great hulking split levels, all in the most nauseous pastels

and dreadfully expensive too, I can't think why' (30). She assures the Wheelers that the home she is promising them has 'absolutely no connection with that' (30). In their turn Frank and April feel superior to and mock Mrs Givings as a feather-brained suburbanite aspiring to the kind of cultural capital that they believe themselves, as artistic intellectuals, to possess. In fact Mrs Givings does become infatuated with the Wheelers for precisely this reason, and sets them up in her mind as *her* ideal models. It begins at their first meeting, as Frank and April exchange a sophisticated banter about the possibilities of their new home:

> "Yes, I think it's sort of—nice, don't you, darling? Of course it does have the picture window; I guess there's no escaping that."
>
> "I guess not," Frank said. "Still, I don't suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities."
>
> "Oh, that's marvelous," Mrs. Givings cried, and her laughter enclosed them in a warm shelter of flattery... (31)

So the move to suburbia, while perceived by the Wheelers as a kind of capitulation, also offers a chance of safe refuge against mimetic crisis in a 'clean and quiet' place (31). The novel makes clear that the Wheelers are moving to a community driven by imitation and desire, as symbolised by the attitude of Mrs Givings, and it is an environment that will offer no such protection. However, settled into Revolutionary Road, the Wheelers begin to enjoy themselves. As when Frank began working at Knox, there is a certain pleasure to be taken in feeling superior to their surroundings. While they have no explicit mediator or model in the Girardian sense, they maintain a mental idea of the Kind of People they are determined to be: 'Intelligent, thinking people' who 'take things like this in their stride', mocking their 'deadly dull jobs in the city and deadly dull homes in the suburbs' as 'absurdities' beneath their true dignity (Yates 21).

One of Frank and April's chief pleasures is their friendship with their nearest neighbours, the Campbells. Shep and Milly Campbell also struggle with questions of ontological uncertainty: Shep, particularly, has travelled a circuitous route to end up on Revolutionary Road. He was raised in an upper-class family, watched over by a French nanny and dressed in 'tartan kilts that came from Bergdorf Goodman' (145). Motivated by resentment and envy of the rougher boys who teased him, young Shep sets them up as his mediators and aims to imitate them. Shep's heart's desire is to be 'insensitive and ill-bred', all the things his mother called 'vulgar' (145, 146). He strikes out towards his ideal manhood, training as a mechanical engineer and revelling in the 'spit-and-sawdust company of other campus toughs' (146). He rejects the ideals of his family, 'growling his beer-bloated disdain for the very idea of liberal arts' (146), and moves to Arizona and marries Milly, a working-class girl. Yet having attained his goal, he is unsatisfied. As Girard's theory describes: 'the moment the hero takes hold of the desired object its 'virtue' disappears like gas from a burst balloon... thus provoking the famous Stendhalian exclamation: "Is that all it is?!"' (Girard, *DDN* 88).

Being like his models has not given Shep the ontological fullness that he sought. And so he begins to feel like a 'fool', that 'the high adventure of pretending to be something he was not had led him into a way of life he didn't want and couldn't stand...' (Yates 147).

As I have previously mentioned, Girard describes this point in the process of mimetic desire in exactly these terms. The subject 'cannot deny the failure' of his project to be fulfilled by possessing the object, and so directs his disappointment at the now-despised object of desire, blaming the object for its insufficiency and conferring the power to satisfy on a new object, 'jumping from one slippery stone to another' (Girard, *DDN* 89). Just as Girardian theory predicts, Shep is soon swept up into a new mediated desire, and his model is the intellectual

man of 'the East', who inhabits 'a world that could and should have been his' (Yates 147). He is filled with desire for the objects of the Eastern man's life:

> In the East, he then believed, a man went to college not for vocational training but in disciplined search for wisdom and beauty … wearing rumpled tweeds and flannels, he could have strolled for hours among ancient elms and clock towers, talking with his friends, and his friends would have been the cream of their generation. (147)

'Haunted' by 'bright visions' and 'brooding [on] fantasies' of his new ideal (147, 148), Shep begins to look at his engineering buddies with snobbish disdain, and to alarm his wife Milly who is a cheerful native of their 'vulgar' world (148). He fixates on new objects of desire, symbols of successful imitation of his models, and Shep begins to read literary journals and listen to classical music. Eventually he moves his family to Connecticut. Shep now prides himself on having overcome his old fear 'of having culturally missed out and fallen behind his generation' (150), and Frank Wheeler is both model and rival in this new life. Both he and Milly look to the Wheelers as mediators, specifically *to learn what to desire*: 'the Campbells [were]… ready to hate it or love it or espouse whatever other opinion of it might please the Wheelers most' (261).

Although Shep asserts to himself that he is 'certainly … the equal of a man like Frank Wheeler' (150), this assertion is itself a statement of rivalry. He suffers the obsessive envy of the Girardian subject, especially in his desire to possess April Wheeler, his rival's most proudly possessed object. He fantasises about her, imagining what she is wearing and whispering "I love you, April," under his breath (155). Shep compares Milly to April constantly in his mind, evaluating how well Milly has done at assimilating into their new world:

> … she could dress very nearly as well as April Wheeler and talk very nearly as well on any subject you wanted to name... And she had managed to give every room... the spare, stripped-down, intellectual look that April Wheeler called "interesting." (151)

Fortunately for him, however, Shep is blessed with a grounded pragmatism that saves him from the worst of the tortured mimetic yearning that the Wheelers suffer from. While he is troubled by his desire for April and his rivalry with Frank, he tells himself that 'things could have been an awful lot worse' (149). Much of the glamour of the East has disappeared, again like the Stendhalian 'burst balloon' (Girard, *DDN* 88), but Shep figures that 'the job in Stamford and the Revolutionary Hill Estates... were not exactly what he'd pictured in his Arizona visions of the East, but what the hell…' (Yates 149). Instead of leaping onto another 'slippery stone' (Girard, *DDN* 89), Shep settles down to make the best of it. The Campbells are largely content with their life, especially with the added pleasure of feeling distinguished by the Wheelers as the superior pick of their suburban set. But the degree to which the Campbells are deeply invested in the system of mimetic desire, evaluating and defining themselves in relation to their models, adds significantly to the sense that Revolutionary Road is a cauldron of bubbling mimetic desire—which in Girardian terms creates a narrative tension toward impending crisis.

It is in the sub-community of the Wheelers and Campbells that the novel first depicts the scapegoat-mechanism, in the form of conversational expulsions of their inferior neighbours. The Wheelers and Campbells meet regularly for dinner, during which they enjoy an unvarying ritual of impassioned conversation about the absurdities of suburbia and their immunity from the same. Evening talk over cocktails revolves around 'the elusive but endlessly absorbing subject of Conformity, or The Suburbs, or Madison Avenue, or American Society Today' (62):

> "Oh Jesus," Shep might begin, "you know this character next door to us? Donaldson? […] did I tell you what he said about his barbecue pit?" And there would follow an anecdote of extreme suburban smugness that left them weak with laughter. "Oh, I don't believe it," April would insist. "Do they really talk that way?"
>
> And Frank would develop the theme. "The point is it wouldn't be so bad if it weren't so typical. It isn't only the Donaldsons—it's the Cramers too, and the whaddyacallits, the Wingates, and a million others. It's all the idiots I ride with on the train every day. It's a disease. Nobody thinks or feels or cares any more..."
>
> ...Milly Campbell would writhe in pleasure. "Oh, that's so true. Isn't that true, darling?"
>
> They would all agree... (Yates 63)

In Girardian terms, the Wheelers and Campbells are diffusing the tension caused by mimetic rivalry by uniting against a common enemy (Girard, *VS* 290)—in this case, the Donaldsons, Cramers et al. The foursome enact a verbal scapegoat-ritual that provides them with a pleasurable Girardian catharsis, and which recoheres their small group that might otherwise crack with the pressures of mimetic rivalry. Identifying their neighbours as the 'Other'—the problem with society, the source of pestilence—they are able to connect with one another as allies.

It is crucial for the Wheelers and Campbells to believe in their superior worth against the scapegoat-figures of their neighbours. They are blind to the reality of their own carefully-constructed mimetic identities and cathartic process, while mocking the supposed blindness of others:

> "It's as if everybody'd made this tacit agreement to live in a state of total self-deception. The hell with reality! Let's have a whole bunch of … cute little houses painted white and pink and baby blue […] and if old reality ever does pop out and say Boo we'll all get busy and pretend it never happened." (Yates 69)

The phrase 'white and pink and baby blue' suggests the American flag, though a particularly gentle version: a symbol of the American Dream diluted to an extra-palatable mildness. The American Dream and its visions of grandeur may be partly to blame for the Wheelers' aspirational restlessness, but on Revolutionary Road they are living a particularly diluted version of that Dream: their supposed superiority and success consists solely of performing a ritual mocking of their neighbours. But this ritual, reassuring as it is, isn't sufficiently satisfying. Something more potent is required, and so the Wheelers are the driving force behind the establishment of a small community theatre.

The community theatre is supposed to bring culture and ideas to the sterile environment of Revolutionary Road. The Wheelers, the Campbells, and a few others are captivated by their plan to realise some of their ideals in actual practice: 'the healthy, hopeful sound of it: the birth of a really good community theater right here, among themselves' (7). The large cast of the play, and the larger prospectively appreciative audience, reaches out to include the Donaldsons, Cramers et al in the community of 'here, among themselves', a dramatic force that might just be able to violently expel the imagined scapegoat of Soulless Suburbia right out of their neighbourhood, rendering the entire community safe and united.

The play they choose to stage is *The Petrified Forest*, a drama about escaping the dead-end existence of working life for the life of art. April, the Queen of the coterie, is to play the female lead. On stage, April presents herself to the community as the ultimate object of mimetic desire, delivering her key line, "Wouldn't you like to be loved by me?" (9).

The novel does not give any information about the play or its plot (April's key line of included dialogue works on its own without explanation) but *The Petrified Forest* was a hit 1934–35 Broadway play, then a popular Humphrey Bogart and Bette Davis film in 1936—an influential narrative on Americans who grew up with Hollywood, the Wheelers' generation. It has been called 'hopeful' and 'optimistic', especially as regards the possibility of escaping the crises of the Great Depression and revitalising the American Dream (Bindas 21, 32). The plot has a number of relevant resonances: a young heroine (played in this case by April) who is desperate to escape her dull American life and move to Paris to pursue an artistic career; an older woman who wanted to move to Europe and be an actress but who got married and had children instead; a young Frank-like man who believes he could have been 'a major artist, profound, yet inarticulate' had *he* moved to Europe (Sherwood 351); and a sacrificial heroic death. In fact there was a popular television production of *The Petrified Forest* aired in the United States in 1955, at the same time the novel sets the Laurel Players' production. Given the novel's transparency about the characters' constant play-acting (which I explore in detail later in this chapter), this seems an unlikely coincidence. Rather, it adds another dimension to the novel's constant reminders about stages and acting: here are fictional characters playing the part of other fictional characters in a mirror-imitation of another set of actors playing those parts on television.

The play's opening night is heavy with its potential as a liminal rite to move the neighbourhood into a new era of meaning and identity. The theatre company is 'amateur' but nevertheless 'costly and very serious', and the audience are 'very serious' as they arrive for what they all believe will be a 'significant evening' (Yates 4, 7). However, while the first minutes are promising, a few mishaps derail the production and it becomes an exercise in denial and futility. The performance drags on with agonising awkwardness, 'a cruel and protracted endurance test in which April Wheeler's performance was as bad as the others, if not worse' (10). The players

were hoping to embody their mimetic ideals on stage, in order to be revealed as the kind of 'intelligent, thinking' people they have always strived to be. In the event, the only person who succeeds in imitating and embodying his mimetic ideal on stage is the gangly teenage boy who steps up to dismantle the set after the disaster is over, finding a sense of identity in the desirable objects of his future profession:

> He stood posing self-consciously in the footlights … proudly turning his body to show that the tools of the electrician's trade—knife, pliers, coils of wire—were slung in a professional-looking holster of oiled leather and worn low on one tense buttock of his dungarees. (11)

It is obvious to everyone that the play has been a failure—with the exception of Mrs Givings, undiscerning, and robotically, mimetically aspirational, eager to embrace all things cultured, whose voice can be heard above the awkward silence 'repeating "*Very* nice," over and over again' (11).

April's pivotal role in the play's failure, her suffering in that 'cruel and protracted' (10) public humiliation, is an early prefiguration of her fate as a scapegoat. She steps onto the stage with the responsibility of redeeming their entire community by her graces; since she fails, she is fated to eventually take the blame. This disaster is the catalyst for a huge fight between Frank and April, in which the key point of mutual attack is false identity (28). Each of their senses of identity is precarious, an acted part mediated by imitation of their imagined models; it is therefore essential that both of them believe in the absolute authenticity of their identities, and to question each other's authenticity is a blow that threatens to collapse not only their relationship but their selves.

The failed play and the big fight form the opening scenes of the novel. The novel thus begins with two foundational images: a failed performance on a theatre stage, and the accusation of failed performance off-stage, as Frank accuses April of being a perpetual actress, an artificial prima donna who is trying to make him play the 'role of dumb, insensitive suburban husband' (28); in turn she accuses him of trying to 'fool' her with artificial 'love' (28). The motif of failed plays will continue to resonate through the novel.

After the play, the Wheelers find themselves in an awkward position. They have always blamed their neighbours for the flaws and ills of the community; the regular verbal scapegoat-ritual of their dinner parties has always worked to renew their own sense of identity and the special bond between themselves and the Campbells. However, 'blame for the failure of the Laurel Players could hardly be fobbed off on Conformity or The Suburbs or American Society Today' (64). Frank's reaction to this uncomfortable truth is to do just what he has always accused his neighbours of doing—ignoring reality. He simply *does* blame the other players for the failure of the play, and categorises it as more evidence of his and April's superiority (25).

Frank is so invested in his mimetic image of himself that no crisis as mere as a failed amateur theatre production can break through his determination to conceive of himself and April as rising stars. He argues that while the other players might feel disappointed, he and April ought to see the play for what it always was—a doomed attempt by suburbanites to be artists—and they should be above any emotional entanglement with such a pathetic enterprise. It's 'bad enough', he argues, to have to live amongst these 'damn little suburban types', and they mustn't fall into the trap of actually identifying with their neighbours' 'little half-assed' catastrophes (25).

At the next dinner with the Campbells, Frank sticks to the routine and plays his role as the orator, the High Priest who pronounces the rites of their cathartic lounge-room ritual, in an

attempt to banish the heavy sense of failure and restore their small community to coherence and self-congratulation. He tells his mocking anecdote as usual, with all his usual 'tricks', but April resists participation and refuses to laugh. She is contemptuous of the feeble ritual, and looks at Frank with 'pitying boredom' (71). The failure of the play has revealed to her that their plan of living the life of art whilst in suburbia has failed. Like Frank, she seems to see the failure of the play as the result of trying to create art in suburbia rather than a failure of her own capacities, but she feels the need for a more radical solution than just pretending it did not happen—in other words, for some sacrifice to purge herself of her humiliation and mark the beginning of a new chapter. April's response to Frank's forced and jolly dismissal of the play in the car on the way home is complicated: April seems deeply disappointed to the point of shock, perhaps provoked into self-reflection, but this is quickly subsumed by the much easier activity of their screaming, gloves-off argument of mutual blame. Thus, initially, the object of April's scorn is Frank, whom she treats with disgusted disdain, blaming him for bringing her to these reduced circumstances with nothing more to enjoy than what she now sees as the pathetic consolation of their dinner-party ritual with the Campbells. But blaming Frank doesn't work very well because he refuses to *take* the blame, and thus it leads only to more conflict. After a couple of tense days, April hits on a new strategy: blaming herself, in a grand sacrificial gesture—'her whole day had been a heroic build-up for this moment of self-abasement; now it was here, and she was damned if she'd stand for any interference' (116).

April declares to Frank that their unhappy circumstances are her fault, that she has forced him to commit to the 'enormous, obscene delusion' that having children means an office job and a suburban home (118). Her confession is staged as a heroic *anagnorisis*: 'it suddenly began to dawn on me that it's my fault. It's always been my fault…' (116).

While Frank is always glad to be told that he is in the right, April's next move takes him by surprise: she proposes that they cut and run from Connecticut, and move permanently to Paris. In the European city of their dreams *she* will get an office job, leaving Frank to discuss philosophy in cafes, wander through art galleries, and bloom into the Outstanding Man they have both always known him to be.

Faced with the prospect of having to actually deliver on the heady rhetoric he has been spouting for years, Frank is 'instantly frightened', and his initial impulse is to try and 'dismiss the whole thing as an endearing whimsy' (113).[41] However, April does not find it hard to convince him to agree to her plan, as the daunting future is dim compared to the immediate and gratifying payoff of a new and ego-boosting identity for them both: the outstanding couple, too brilliant for America, leaving all their pedestrian and contemptible neighbours behind.

The Paris plan is a plan to stop weakly imitating their European models in dinner-party conversation alone, and actually to go and imitate them in lived reality—to assume their lifestyles in an attempt to truly *become* them. The power of mimetic desire has never been stronger in either of them: Frank and April find revitalised self-worth, and passion for one another, in their new plan. Frank sits in his office cubicle, gloating over his superiority and uniqueness from his colleagues. He feels 'truly detached', defining himself in opposition to their undesirable characteristics, 'worried', 'little', 'pretentious', 'old' and 'boring' (181). His new life in Paris feels so imminent that already he imagines himself so secure in his new identity that he can't remember any of his former colleagues' names (181). The daily commute on the train

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[41] In Girardian terms, Frank is a kind of Don Quixote, whose life is a playacting imitation of his heroic ideal. Quixote's fantasy holds together as long as he does not have to come into competition with Amadeus or vie with genuine medieval knights. Likewise, Frank likes to be thought of as the honorary-European intellectual in Connecticut, but the prospect of being in a community of *actual* European intellectuals, and in rivalry with the Great Men of his imagination, is terrifying.

becomes a pleasure, watching other working men and feeling sorry for them, again mocking their qualities of being 'small' and 'neat', 'comically serious', 'little' and 'dumb' (126). He looks with scorn on the objects associated with these undesirable businessmen's identities, such as neat haircuts, button-down collars, telephones and newspaper (126).

Of course, the thought—at least for Frank—of having to actually go to Europe creates some anxiety. The perfect halfway point is to have decided to go but *not have actually left yet*: to revel in all the triumph of the object of desire's imminent acquisition, without quite having to grasp it. In the evenings, Frank and April talk endlessly about their lucky escape and how wonderful it is to be the kind of people too clever to fall into the suburban trap (135, 136). Their sex life is revitalised as they once again see the other as an object of desire befitting their mediated ideas of themselves: Frank no longer sees April as a suburban housewife, but as a glamorous *Parisienne*, soon to be desired by intellectual European men, and therefore desirable to him. April sees Frank once again as one of the golden people, and she is 'enraptured with him' (135). They are riding the heady wave of mimetic desire, captivated by their visions of themselves assuming the ontological substance of their mediators. However, in terms of Girardian tragedy, they are careering headlong towards crisis and violence.

Having laid the foundation of characters and circumstances caught in mimetic desire, the narrative has prepared the way for an imminent mimetic crisis. The symptoms of mimetic crisis appear, and swell in number and potency.

In Girardian terms, as a myth or tragedy moves towards its crisis-climax, undifferentiation is a growing problem (Girard, "Mimesis" 10). As in the first two novels, undifferentiation is a very present threat in *Revolutionary Road*. There is confusion and lack of difference regarding time,

such as when Frank is reading to the children and the newspaper comics suddenly seem infinite, as 'the funnies seemed to go on forever'; no matter how many pages he turns, the task is 'no nearer to completion' (Yates 59).

The novel is almost histrionically explicit about the necessity of time as a system of meaning and control. In a particularly protracted and passionate aside, the omniscient narrator holds forth for two entire pages about the importance of measured time:

> Our ability to measure and apportion time affords an almost endless source of comfort. "Synchronize watches at oh six hundred," says the infantry captain, and each of his huddled lieutenants finds a respite from fear … the watch has restored, however briefly, an illusion of personal control. Good, it counsels [from] each terribly vulnerable wrist; fine: so far, everything's happening right on time. (226)

So time is important: given this, it is significant that an absence of structured or normal time happens throughout the novel, especially while Frank and April are excited about the Paris plan and 'the calendar had lost its power' (255). This is described as a time of 'joyous derangement', in which Frank has no 'concern for the passage of time' and is 'unable to tell how long it had been otherwise' (126). The days have 'ceased to have any meaning' (132). This keeps happening to Frank even once the Paris plan is a distant memory: "'You mean to say it's Friday already?" he was apt to demand on what he'd thought was Tuesday or Wednesday…' (256).

Mrs Givings has a moment of fantasy about her girlhood, recalling the experience of dressing for dates in her upstairs bedroom, which becomes genuine undifferentiation regarding time (and a sudden intrusion of decay and monstrosity):

> … the real shock came when she sat on the bed to take off her stockings, because she had expected her feet to be slim and white … Instead, splayed on the carpet like two

> toads, they were tough and knuckled with bunions, curling to hide their corneous toenails. (175)

Undifferentiation also troubles the characters' thoughts, feelings and senses. Frank, after a fight with April, cannot be certain in his mind 'whether he was angry or contrite, whether it was forgiveness he wanted or the power to forgive' (33). When April agrees to continue her pregnancy, Frank wakes with 'a sense of dread' even though he got his own way; it takes him some minutes to be certain 'that it was good news, not bad' (254).

The physical objects of suburbia are also uncannily undifferentiated. The furniture in the Wheelers' living room appears to be 'floating, all its contents adrift', each object's position has a 'tentative look', 'the sofa was here and the big table there, but they might just as well have been reversed' (32). In the carpark of the local nightclub where the Wheelers and Campbells go for drunken escapism, the rows of Fords and Cadillacs are undifferentiated and infinite, a dizzying landscape of chrome that stretches beyond sight, 'undulating', 'endless' and 'numberless' (265).

In their suburban home, Shep and Milly Campbell are literally breeding undifferentiation, seen in this description of their four sons:

> They were lying on their bellies in a row … identically dressed in blue knit pajamas, all propped on their elbows … Their four snub-nosed blond faces, in profile, looked remarkably alike … their jaws were all working in cadence on cuds of bubble gum... (153)

To Shep's eyes, his sons are often unrecognisable not only one from another but as members of his family at all, as he 'quite often' stumbles upon them in his house and thinks 'who are these four guys?', taking time to realise that they are his own children (153).

The community of Revolutionary Road clearly has an undifferentiation problem. According to Girardian theory, undifferentiation is kept in check by formal rites and systems of difference. There are a few references to rituals for making and maintaining meaning, from the daily mini-rituals of Frank's office life (for instance 'the nodding, side-stepping ritual' of entering and exiting the elevators in the Knox building (83)) to the almost scripted, familiar routine that opens the Wheelers' and Campbells' regular evening parties:

> "Hi!" They called to one another. "Hi!..." "Hi!..."
>
> This one glad syllable … was the traditional herald … Then came the handshakings, the stately puckered kissings, the sighs … [then] having sipped … their drinks … a moment of mutual admiration; then they [relaxed]. (60)

The most important structure for maintaining difference in the world of the novel seems to be the dichotomy between 'man' and 'woman', which is emphasised repeatedly, though the novel's droll narratorial tone suggests that the characters' notions of gender identity are as forced as the rest of their self-delusions. Frank is very concerned with manhood. When April wants to hurt him with the cruellest possible blow, she screams, "Look at you! Look at you, and tell me how … by any stretch of the imagination you can call yourself a man!" (29).

The following morning, Frank wakes up to see April outside the window, wearing a pair of his trousers and pushing the lawnmower. She has blurred the difference between man and woman, husband and wife, by stepping into his traditional role. Frank is incensed, and rushes to 'take the lawnmower away from her, by force if necessary, in order to restore … balance' (41). The 'balance' Frank needs, a kind of basic order to the universe, is an asserted difference between men and women. He is deeply gratified when John Givings compliments him with the observation that April is a genuine 'female', and Frank is a genuine 'male', rare examples of true womanhood and manhood that are seldom met with in the modern world (201).

Frank feels secure when he does things that he thinks of as manly. Digging the garden, he thinks of it as 'a man's work' (47). He looks at his house and categorises it as a 'sanctuary' built by a 'man's love' for 'a man's wife and children'. He gazes with pride and 'pleasure' at the sight of 'his own … dirty hand … because he was a man' (47).

After having sex with his secretary Maureen Grube, Frank feels his desired balance established: 'He felt like a man' (106). He rides this heady sense of identity all the way home on the train:

> Could a *man* ride home in the rear smoker, primly adjusting his pants at the knees…? Hell, no. The way for a *man* to ride was erect and out in the open, … standing with his feet set wide apart … the way for a *man* to alight was to swing down the iron steps and leap… (106, my emphasis)

Literal manhood in this passage is conflated with idiomatic 'manhood', as Frank identifies himself with the phallic imagery of being 'erect… out in the open' with legs wide apart to accommodate his swollen sense of masculine identity. He experiences a similar affirmation of identity, this time reaching apotheosis, during sex with April during the Paris-planning phase, as she recants all her former criticisms and tells him, 'You're the most valuable and wonderful thing in the world. You're a man.' (121)

> Never in taking his wife had he triumphed more completely over time and space. … He had taken command of the universe because he was a man, and because the marvelous creature who opened and moved for him … was a woman. (121)

For Frank, the ultimate proof of manhood is to have a woman bear his child. When April first fell pregnant, in the first year of their marriage, she resisted continuing the pregnancy and he had to fight to make her give in to his wishes—but he succeeded, and she fell weeping and defeated into his arms. The memory of April's capitulation makes Frank glad, as a submissive

and child-bearing woman is a necessary defining complement to his identity as a man: 'no single moment of his life had ever contained a better proof of manhood than that, if any proof were needed: holding that tamed, submissive girl … while she promised she would bear his child' (52).

So when April falls pregnant with their third child, spoiling the Paris plan, Frank is secretly thrilled (219). He feels the effect of the news immediately: a revitalised manly identity as he looks at himself in the mirror, noting the 'new maturity and manliness in the kindly, resolute face that nodded back at him' (221).

April's reluctance, yet again, to continue the pregnancy is therefore highly alarming to Frank. Frank needs April to embody a womanhood that gives differentiated meaning to his identity as man and father-figure, and he equates womanhood with childbearing. April questions this line of reasoning: "Is that what women are supposed to be expressing when they don't want to have children? That they're not really women, or don't want to be women, or something?" (244).

Frank sticks to his argument. Since childbearing, to Frank, is the essence of womanhood, he categorises women who don't want children as failed women, women who are trying—with echoes of monstrosity and undifferentiation—to be men. He accuses April of suffering from 'penis-envy', as in a Freudian analysis he claims to have read of a woman who 'kept trying to get rid of her pregnancies' and 'was really trying to … open herself up' to allow 'the penis [to] come out and hang down where it belonged' (245). Frank suggests that April was deprived of the Freudian mimetic process of 'little girls … observing and admiring and wanting to emulate their mothers' and therefore lacks the healthy womanly quintessence which is to 'attract a man, establish a home, have children, and so on' (245).

The differentiation between 'man' and 'woman', and the definition of 'woman' as wife and mother, is an important system of meaning-making on Revolutionary Road. Frank demonstrates a mythical 'yearning for rigidity in response to anxiety about boundary disintegration' (Bronfen 181). April's reluctance to affirm this dichotomy, with her appearance in man's pants mowing the lawn and her reluctance to bear children, is a major contributor to her eligibility as a scapegoat: the mythic scapegoat is a creature born of undifferentiation who blurs boundaries and threatens stable meanings.

Other significant signs of Girardian mimetic crisis are decay and sickness, which are again very present in *Revolutionary Road*. The characters are all engaged in an apparently hopeless battle to keep sickness and decay at bay, and despite their efforts it confronts them wherever they turn.

Mrs Givings thinks of her magazine-modelled home as a kind of immunisation or defence against such things, 'a final bastion against vulgarity' (162), where she goes to escape the 'exhaust fumes' and 'desolation' of the wider world with its greasy and degenerate environs of 'supermarkets and pizza joints and frozen custard stands' (162). But despite her fantasies of safety at home, there she is assailed by the sight of her bloated, feeble husband and her own bunion-infected feet (174, 175).

The novel's interior spaces are being invaded and violated by dirt and decay. Frank's boss has the status symbol of a silver whisky set on his desk, but 'all its elements [are] finely coated with dust' (251). April is furiously upset at discovering her pregnancy, which she treats as an unwanted infection, running to the drugstore to buy the rubber syringe which could wash it out of her body (223), and coming home to undertake a violent scouring of her house, a symbolic purging of dark, hidden cavities, waging war on 'clinging scum', a monstrous seething stain that

comes alive as an ant swarm, and finally the 'dripping disorder' (217) of her cellar including a soggy cardboard box that 'releas[es] all its mildewed contents in a splash' (217)—an eerie phrase in the context of April's later death by haemorrhage.[42] Her later act of risking self-harm in order to purge her interior spaces is also echoed in the description of her 'breathing dust and spitting cobwebs', 'thrust[ing] herself head and shoulders into the oven' (217) to scour it.

Throughout the novel, the grime and decay in the characters' physical environment is a reflection of the infection or decay in their own (and others') bodies. Frank, who so admired his father's strong and capable hands, is disgusted by his own hands which are 'bloated and pale', with 'bitten down nails' that make him want to 'beat and bruise them against the edge of the sink' (36). They are so degenerate as to become suddenly monstrous, like a zombie—Frank at one point lifts his 'pink-blotched hand from his pocket, half expecting to find it torn to a pulp of blood and gristle' (14). One morning, Frank awakes with his nostrils thick with mucus, 'plugged as if with rubber cement' while a black fly hovers and crawls nearby (53). He suffers headaches ('the nerves at the roots of his teeth seemed to have entwined with the nerves at the roots of his scalp in a tingling knot' (58)) and drinking martinis at lunchtime to impress his boss causes unbearable noise in his ears and blurriness of his vision, until he can perceive only his boss Bart Pollock's 'tirelessly moving mouth' (209).

This last line is a direct reference to an earlier memory-scene in which young Frank accompanied his father on an identical lunchtime Knox interview, and was sickened by the sight of the boss eating:

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[42] April's narrative destiny as the tragic sacrifice, bleeding out from her attempt at a home abortion, is also foreshadowed in the very first pages of the novel in an image of an incident from her youth, when 'a menstrual flow of unusual suddenness and volume' surprises her in the classroom, and she flees the room, and runs all the way home, with a 'red stain the size of a maple leaf on the seat of her white linen skirt…' (19)

> The worst part of him was his mouth, which was so wet that a dozen shining strands of spittle clung and trembled between his moving lips… later … [Frank] staggered and crouched barefoot in the tilting, oddly shrunken bathroom of his home, and [the memory] made the spasms of vomiting come again and again. (76, 77)

The figure of the boss could be positioned as a kind of model, but in *Revolutionary Road* the boss is never one of the 'golden people'. Instead, the association of the boss-figure with grotesquery and sickness makes him an embodiment of both the high-status ideals of the American Dream, and the Dream's darker underside: its roots in mimetic desire, and the consequent threat of crisis, disease and the monstrous. This monstrosity is also evident in the doubling of Frank Senior's boss with Frank Junior's, twin-doubles being a particularly malevolent mythical monster, signalling undifferentiation (Girard, "Mimesis" 10). The boss may appear to be the manifestation of success, but on closer inspection he is a monster.

The notion of decay lurking beneath a presentable surface is repeated. Milly, the neat and cheerful housewife, at close quarters gives Shep 'a faint whiff of something rancid' (Yates 152), and later when drunk tries to smilingly cover her 'faint scent of vomit' (264). Beautiful April without her makeup realises her face in the mirror 'looked forty years old and as haggard as if it were set to endure a physical pain' (16). She prefers to wear flattering dresses rather than shorts which reveal 'how heavy and soft and vein-shot her thighs had grown' (234), although after she becomes pregnant she takes to 'parading them in a kind of spite' (234).

Even the minor characters bear signs of sickness and decay. The Campbells' son is underweight, and Milly is anxious that 'he might be suffering from an obscure blood ailment' (61). John Givings 'at close range' has the face of a man 'worn down by chronic physical pain' (194), and his cheeks are creased by surgical scars that reveal 'his face had probably been a mass of boils or cists' (200). His father, Howard Givings, has been affected by years of office work

just as a sailor is 'marked by wind and sun' (166), though in Howard's case he is weak and degenerate:

> He was very white and soft. His face, instead of wrinkling or sinking with age, had puffed out into the delicate smoothness of infancy, and his hair was like a baby's too, as fine as milkweed silk. He had never been a sturdy man, and now his frailty was emphasized by the spread of a fat belly, which obliged him to sit with his meager knees wide apart. (166)

Again here there is the suggestion that the successful businessmen of the city streets are, inside, infected and decaying. This is further alluded to by the mention of Frank's immediate boss, who 'shifted his weight uncomfortably from one buttock to the other, the gesture of a man with haemorrhoids' (184). Even the elevator operators in the Knox building are affected by their proximity to the pollution of the business world:

> …the very old man whose knees were so sprung that painful-looking bulges pressed against the backs of his trousers … the enormous boy whom some glandular disorder had afflicted with the high hips of a woman and the downy head and beardless face of an infant (83)

The environment of *Revolutionary Road*, like the Detroit suburbs of *The Virgin Suicides* and the Connecticut mansions of *The Ice Storm*, is portrayed as chronically infected with sickness and decay. The theatrical venture by the Laurel Players is an attempt to ward off all this sickness; the players see it as a restorative against the 'degeneration' of their lives (262). When the community theatre fails, April argues that they are in danger of 'staying here until we rot' (191). The worst of the danger, of course, is that the rot is *contagious*.

Girard notes that contagion is a crucial trope to the scapegoat-myth or tragedy, symbolising the domino-effect spread of mimetic crisis that can only be halted by the sacrifice of the scapegoat (Girard, "Mimesis" 13). *Revolutionary Road* begins with contagion. The disaster that precipitates the failure of the play is an 'intestinal flu' that infects the leading man with a 'high fever', and he begins to 'vomit in his dressing room' (Yates 8). The narrative is explicit here about the contagiousness of crisis: 'The virus of calamity, dormant and threatening all these weeks, had erupted now and spread from the helplessly vomiting man until it infected everyone in the cast but April Wheeler' (8).

When Frank and April move to the suburbs, they are wary of being exposed to its toxic influence: while they are 'forced' to endure living in 'this environment', 'the important thing was to keep from being *contaminated*' (21, my emphasis). At their dinner parties with the Campbells they rant against the contagious decay of America, a country 'rotten with sentimentality' that has been 'spreading like a disease for years' (135), and the 'cancerous growth of Senator McCarthy' that has 'poisoned the United States' (62). In a buoyant moment, considering the Paris plan, Frank feels relieved that his work at Knox will be 'cut away from his life like a tumor from his brain; and good riddance' (131).

Even John Givings's madness carries the threat of contagion. Visiting the mental hospital 'always left [Mrs Givings] feeling soiled' (162); when John is brought by his parents to visit the Wheelers, April sends the children over to the Campbells so as not to 'expose them' to his madness (192).[43]

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[43] As in *The Ice Storm*, there is a connection here between success and insanity. *The Ice Storm* depicts a mental hospital for the rich and famous; John Givings broke down after a stellar career as a university academic. In these novels, even if the promise of the American Dream is attained, success brings destruction and dissolution.

As the contagious spread of mimetic crisis gathers momentum, the chance of an outbreak of violence rises. There is little actual physical violence in the novel, until April's decisive act, but there is both a steady increase in the frequency of Frank and April's verbally violent conflicts, and a growing sense of imminent physical violence. This sense of suspense, of impending violence that may strike at any moment, is often just beneath the surface of the narrative. John Givings at one point 'veers sharply' towards his mother in apparent attack, 'his right fist describing a wide, rapid arc', which causes his father's glasses to 'flash in fright for a moment' until John's 'fist landed—not in a blow but in a pulled-back, soft, affectionate cuffing' (199). When digging the garden near his children, Frank mistakes a tree root for his watching son's foot beneath the sharp descent of his shovel and for a horrified moment thinks bloodshed is imminent (54). He overreacts to this fantasy with actual violence, seizing his son and spanking him roughly, ostensibly for getting in the way. The Wheeler children barely appear in the novel, but Michael does provide one other moment of imagined imminent violence, playing with his sister and pretending to fall down the slope of their front yard to his death (249).

Given that the existence of the Wheeler children is such a pivotal matter in the novel, their arrival prompting the move to the suburbs and the issue of child-bearing so crucial to Frank and April's conflict, the children's absence from the action of the novel seems significant. The children make brief, cursory appearances in the novel, as they seem to make brief, cursory appearances in their parents' reality. Frank has a strong sense of his identity as a father, but this is more about his imagined sense of self than his lived practice, since when he does interact with his children he becomes bored or frustrated (58). April in her few scenes with the children seems distracted, dreaming of Paris and working to convince the children that they can fit into her fantasy, adapting their identities to her mimetic ideals (188).

Michael's moment of play-acting at 'falling down dead' occurs while April is contemplating terminating her third pregnancy. April's children are living despite her desire to terminate her past pregnancies, and there are resonances to Michael's cry of which he is unaware. April is a potentially malevolent force, a transgressor of the prohibition against acts of violence against one's own body—Frank refers to her proposed abortion as 'criminal mutilation of herself', 'committing a crime against your own substance' (230)—and therefore in mythical terms April is a moral criminal, dangerous and taboo: a highly eligible scapegoat.

This tragic tale of a community chronically polluted with the manifestations of mimetic crisis needs someone to blame, and the Wheelers are increasingly becoming the Others of their community.

The Wheelers are additionally eligible scapegoats because, like the Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides*, they have the mark of potential divinity. Mrs Givings particularly treats them with worshipful awe, bringing offerings of cake and garden plants to their door (42). She venerates them like holy saints, and whispering to herself in her kitchen she rehearses the petition she will make to them about meeting her son John: 'Oh, it didn't matter how she phrased it; she would find the right words when the time came, and she knew the Wheelers would understand. Bless them; bless them; she knew they would understand. (169)'. Her appeal has the qualities of a prayer, and the telephone is a sacred instrument, a kind of sceptre-and-incense for carrying her worshipful petitions, and when 'she put the receiver back it was as if she were returning a rare and exquisite jewel to its velvet case' (254).

But the divine scapegoat is also the guilty scapegoat. The Paris plan makes Frank and April guilty of breaking up their community, and their neighbours respond with anger and blame.

After they tell their neighbours about the Paris plan, the Wheelers go from the position of models to the position of scapegoats, blamed for betraying the community. Mrs Givings is shocked, then outraged at the Wheelers' decision. She immediately casts them as 'unsavoury' (173), possible transgressors, eligible scapegoats guilty of hidden sins: "I mean people don't do things like that, do they? Unless they're—well, running away from something, or something? And I mean I'd hate to think there's anything—well, I don't know what to think; that's the point" (173).

Mrs Givings has an emotional breakdown at this point; the Wheelers were her mediators and idols, a focal point to her world, and with their betrayal she feels decay and failure pressing in on her:

> She cried because she'd had such high, high hopes about the Wheelers tonight and now she was terribly, terribly, terribly disappointed. She cried because … her feet were ugly and swollen and horrible … she cried because Howard Givings was the only man who'd ever asked her to marry him, and because she'd done it, and because her only child was insane. (175)

The mythic scapegoat becomes guilty of crimes far beyond his or her capacity to commit: here, Frank and April are connected with not only Mrs Givings' current disappointment but with her lacklustre husband, insane son and ugly feet.

After the announcement of the Paris plan, the Wheelers' attitude towards the Campbells necessarily alters. Previously, Frank and April were content with their foursome, enjoying the camaraderie of their professedly shared opinions and tastes, with the added flattery of feeling themselves to be the admired models of their friends. Now, they plan to elevate themselves far above this now-despised lifestyle, and agree with each other that 'both those Campbells are a

big, big, big, colossal waste of time' (116). When the Wheelers tell the Campbells of their intention to move to Paris, it shatters the illusion of their group solidarity (156). Shep is irritated by Frank's attitude of superiority, as his former friend is 'acting like a God damned snob', not even bothering to conceal his disdain but rather looking around the room with a smirk, as if he'd never seen such an 'amusingly typical suburban living room' (156).

After the Wheelers go home, the air between Shep and Milly is tense. They have been rejected by their Girardian models, and Milly especially seems to be feeling her inadequacy. Shep comes to her rescue by immediately scorning the Wheelers' plan, depicting it not as a brilliant destiny, but as an idiotic scheme conceived by people who are themselves inadequate and 'immature' (159). Milly responds with deep gratitude, and Shep proceeds to disparage Frank's masculinity, mocking him for agreeing to be financially supported by April and declaring the plan 'half-assed', unbearable to a truly 'manly' husband (159). Shep and Milly reconsolidate their own little community of two by reaffirming the differentiation-system of gender roles with man as breadwinner and woman as home-maker, and by performing a conversational scapegoat-mechanism just like the ritual of their dinner parties—Milly's words are almost an exact echo of her words on a previous evening ("Oh, that's so true," she said. "I was thinking that exact same thing." (159))—except this time they are verbally expelling the Wheelers.

There are a couple of minor references to the idea of the scapegoat-mechanism, that is, regenerative sacrifice, in the novel. When Frank suffers momentary guilt about his affair with Maureen, his instinct is to right his wrong by violent sacrificial atonement, 'to rush outdoors and make some dramatic atonement—smash his fist against a tree' (111). Typically, this imagined 'dramatic atonement' is just that—a symbolic theatrical gesture, not a particularly extreme act of self-harm, and in fact it only occurs in Frank's imagination. But it is significant that Frank intuits that sacrifice is regenerative, as is his blind ignorance—essential for the

Girardian subject performing a sacrifice—about how the mechanism of sacrifice works: for instance, after a fight with April, as he meditates on the strange truth that screaming and smashing objects mysteriously and 'implausibly' leads to a 'long quiet aftermath' and 'reconciliation' (34).

There is an also interesting image that could be read as sacrifice in the depiction of the theatregoers as they leave the theatre after the disastrous play. Shuffling down the aisles 'anxious, round-eyed, two by two' (12), the image is reminiscent of the Biblical story of the animals going into Noah's Ark, but also suggests, in its picture of frightened animals walking up a ramp, the slaughterhouse or sacrificial animals being led to the altar.

As the novelty of the Paris plan begins to wear off, Frank starts to feel the weight of reality pressing in, threatening to burst the euphoric bubble of their new phase of life. As their plans become more concrete, the disparity between fantasy and reality becomes a constant threat, as when April mentions with confidence Frank's previously-asserted ability to speak French and he panics, his face falling into the expression of a 'frightened liar' (138). He had forgotten this old lie, told while seducing April during their courtship, and his panic is the anxiety of a habitual fantasist who is beginning to lose the threads of his multiple deceptions. Frank begins to feel 'depressed', 'harried' by a 'tension' that he can't shake— 'a dread, a constricting heaviness of spirit' (203). April, too, seems to be growing weary of playing her role in their passionate evening routine. She takes on some of the qualities described in her failed performance of *The Petrified Forest*, a 'certain stiffness', an obviously false effort to 'achieve the effect of spontaneity' (203). She knows there is an unspoken script she is supposed to follow, that a 'nestling of the shoulder blade [is] in order', but despite her attempts to 'meet the specifications' she struggles to perform the part (203).

The plan to move to Paris is not going to work: either for the Wheelers, to escape their suburban existence, or for the novel, to escape the tragic momentum towards sacrifice. Mimetic desire has led to mimetic crisis, with its profusion of undifferentiation, contagion and decay, and only the expulsion of a scapegoat can heal the chaos. All that remains is for the most eligible scapegoat to emerge from the mass of the community. Events will lead April to put herself in the way of harm.

When April reveals that she is pregnant, Frank tries to deliver a reaction in keeping with the character of a man thwarted on the cusp of an adventure, as he 'obediently paled and gaped into the look of a man stunned by bad news' (219); but his real feeling is enormous joy and relief, an 'exultant smile' threatening to break through his expression (219). Despite all his assertions about hating his job and home, the pregnancy that must keep him in both is a blessed event: 'the pressure was off; life had come mercifully back to normal' (219).

Frank's hypocrisy is rooted in his own ambivalence about American values and expectations, especially those pertaining to husbands and fathers. The key to this is the ever-present ghost of his first mimetic model, Frank Senior. The outworking of Frank's resentment of his father is not as straightforward as he likes to believe. He is irresistibly drawn towards working for Knox, and while the 'ghosts' of his childhood visit to Knox are 'crowding his head' (79), he finds himself unable to mention his father in the job interview—although he deceives himself that it is simply 'more fun' this way (79).

Shortly after the Paris plan is conceived, Frank is given the opportunity of promotion. This is an uncanny replay of an event in his father's life, an important meeting with the boss that was ultimately fruitless. Frank has the opportunity to walk in his father's shoes—and more than this, to land the promotion that his father never could. The possibility holds a strong mimetic attraction that Frank must conceal from himself, and he does so by imagining how his *other*

mimetic alter-ego, the Brilliant Man Who Is Moving To Paris, will retell it later to his wife (184). As he increasingly fails to control his facial expressions of excitement and admiration, even 'servility', towards his boss, he mentally recasts the scene as one of his mocking anecdotes to reassure himself that he is still superior to Knox and all it stands for (207).

When he discovers that April is pregnant, Frank is free to construct a fantasy future in which he can be *both* of his models—his father *and* the Brilliant Man: he imagines his meteoric rise through the ranks of Knox Business Machines, purchasing the trappings of American success such as a bigger, grander home, *and* the pleasures of the intellectual in trips abroad. He begins 'to draw the picture of a new life' (220) in his usual fantastic grandiosity, mediated by the novels and films he has always dreamed of being part of: ' "You and Mrs. Wheeler are so very unlike one's preconceived idea of American business people," a Henry James sort of Venetian countess might say as they leaned attractively on a balustrade above the Grand Canal' (221).

But if the Wheelers are going to remain on Revolutionary Road, mimetic models and rivals to their neighbours, then the mimetic crisis will simply continue to worsen. If Frank is going to re-join their community by retracting the Paris plan and reassimilating with his peers, then April will be left out on her own. The tragedy is moving towards its inevitable sacrificial act.

After April's pregnancy seems to put an end to the Paris plan, they are provisionally accepted again by their neighbours. However, April is distressed by her pregnancy and reluctant to continue it, in a 'panic' (227) as her dream of escaping the Connecticut suburbs, and her role as dutiful wife and mother, is slipping away.[44] She proposes self-induced abortion. At this point,

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[44] April's dilemma, of course, was shared by many women in postwar suburbia, dissatisfied with the postwar cultural pressures towards prewar gender roles that stifled their desire for larger horizons. Sarah Anderson discusses such 'domestic trauma', and its representation in literature, noting that such narratives often resolve sacrificially—that is, the only escape for the woman is death (Anderson 4).

Frank finds it necessary to conceive of April as fundamentally flawed, and he begins to think of her as unnatural and monstrous (237), a deviant against the natural order of differentiation and her role as a woman. She is defiant—even it means 'there's something awful the matter with me' (236) she is continuing the pregnancy under protest, and still wants to move to Paris as soon as practicable. She also begins to behave in ways that are stereotypically 'hysterical': collapsing into helpless laughter, she 'swayed and staggered', 'laughing and laughing' while Frank consults his memory of movies to figure out whether to slap her (305). The novel contains many references to hysterical laughter in women ('girls who shrieked in paralyzing laughter' (89); 'girls in a paralysis of laughter' (97); 'a woman's shrieking laugh' (275)) and also in John Givings, who is an insane asylum inmate and is characterised by his loud and inappropriate laughter (198, 301). In fact, John states at one point that 'a feminine woman never laughs out loud' but April is not 'feminine' (201). April displays this refusal to be 'feminine' in her unbridled laughter, which Frank describes as 'hysterical' but which is a mockery of his insistence upon defining his wife according to the state of her womb. April has resorted to the performance of hysteria as her only available mode of self-expression (Showalter 147), demonstrated not only in her laughter but her deliberate artificial screams, as she 'shakes the house' with a shriek, but maintains a calm and rational facial expression (Yates 306).

Like the Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides*, April's position as a scapegoat is intrinsically linked to her female body. The fact that she has twice been pregnant, and is now pregnant again, is her most important quality—not only to Frank and their community, but to the plot of the tragedy. Her womb is the focal point, and in true scapegoat-fashion it has the power to save and to destroy. It is a potential source of pollution and disorder as well as life and hope. In describing her as hysterical, Frank is invoking the long tradition of notions of the womb as dangerous—as Andrew Scull notes, early Hippocratic texts declared that in women, 'the womb is the origin of

all diseases' (Scull 12). Women's bodies were considered 'readily deranged' by their reproductive systems, and in Plato's *Timaeus* the womb is itself a kind of monster, 'an animal: voracious, predatory, appetitive, unstable, forever reducing the female into a frail and unstable creature' (Rousseau qtd in 13). April's pregnant body therefore renders her liminal—she may become a mother or a monster.

From this point in the narrative, April's position changes and becomes more complex. She is no longer the Queen of the coterie. Frank, Shep, Milly, Mrs Givings—they all have a plan, a shared fantasy of a rosy communal future in which Frank is a top executive and the Wheelers are the example *par excellence* of the suburban American dream. April does not want to play her part. She is a spanner in the works. April starts to resemble the uncanny figure of the madwoman, 'a marginalized figure within an already marginalized group' (Anderson 64), in Girardian terms a highly eligible sacrificial victim. At this point, April becomes this tragedy's inevitable scapegoat.

It is relevant at this point to turn aside from the action of the plot and consider the ways in which the novel is setting up its tragic stage in preparation for the tragic denouement.

The capacity of *Revolutionary Road* to stage or function as a tragedy is closely bound up with its treatment of plays themselves. The novel is very self-conscious about staging, plays, and acting. Not only do the characters actually stage a play, the failure of which is a pivotal plot event, but after the play they continue to act parts just the same. The description of Milly Campbell's behaviour backstage after the play reveals that the characters are still acting out imagined parts in an imagined world: "'Frank?" Milly Campbell had waved and risen on tiptoe to shout his

name through cupped hands, as if pretending that the crowd were thicker and noisier than it really was' (14).

If the novel is a kind of tragic stage, what it is staging is the act of staging. This multi-layered effect of imagined characters pretending to be imagined characters opens the novel to a reading that is always mindful that we are reading a performance.

The description of the first Wheeler-and-Campbell gathering reads like stage directions for a play, as each person takes his or her place in the *mis-en-scéne*, complete with a brief character description:

> Milly Campbell … squirmed deep into the sofa cushions … not the prettiest girl in the world, maybe, but cute and quick and fun to have around.
>
> Beside her, Frank slid [into his chair] … his thin mouth already moving in the curly shape of wit…
>
> Shep, massive and dependable … set his meaty knees wide apart and worked his tie loose with muscular fingers…
>
> And finally, the last to settle, April arranged herself with careless elegance in the sling chair… They were ready to begin. (60)

Frank is an especially practised actor. In college, he practises his facial expressions in mirrors, learning the precise angle to turn his head 'to give it a leaner, more commanding look' (16) and the best pose for impressing a woman after sexual conquest. When lighting a cigarette in a darkened bedroom, he first sets his facial expression to a 'virile frown' to take best advantage of the flash of the lighter, which will illuminate him in a 'swift, intensely dramatic portrait' (231). In fact, the novel frequently references Frank studying his face in the mirror (69, 16, 231), an

image of an actor in his dressing room that is a telling portrait of Frank's constant mimetic artifice. Frank is always carefully playing a chosen role. His face is a practised mask of 'unusual mobility', 'able to suggest wholly different personalities with each flickering change of expression' (12). After the failure of the play, before walking through the crowd of his friends and neighbours, he arranges his features into the smile of a man 'who knew perfectly well that the failure of an amateur play was nothing much to worry about' (12). Just like his youthful props of jeans and knapsack, Frank takes comfort in acquiring and using objects that signify the character he is trying to attain and sustain, such as when in a moment of stress his hand rises to his collar 'to find reassurance in the grown-up, sophisticated feel of the silk tie and Oxford shirt' (20).

Frank's attraction to April as an object of desire is heightened by her dramatic credentials: the story of her life fits neatly into Frank's technicolour fantasies—the child of two glamorous 1920s socialites who cast her upon uncaring relatives and rushed back to the high life until their untimely, boozy deaths—and Frank admits that he feels 'envy because it was so much more dramatic a story than his own' (39). Frank is less interested in what experiences are really like to live through, and more in whether they make a good story in which the protagonist acquires a glamorous status in the retelling.

April's idolisation of her parents' theatrical otherworldliness is often criticised by Frank, but of course it is this idolisation of glamour that makes April fall in love with him, describing his larger-than-life, always-performing persona as 'the most interesting person I've ever met' (25). Encouraged by Frank, April enjoys acting a part herself: 'when she tipped back her head to laugh or leaned forward to reach out and tap the ash from her cigarette, she made it a maneuver of classic beauty. Anyone could picture her conquering Europe' (133).

Frank finds an even more willing co-star in Maureen Grube, a young secretary at Knox, with whom he has an affair. While a little bit of sleight-of-hand is required to turn her into an appropriately glamorous object of desire, if he 'focused his eyes on her mouth so that the rest of her face was slightly blurred', Frank is able to pretend that he is 'looking at the most desirable woman in the world' (94). Maureen is an ideal playmate as she is already an ardent devotee of mimetically playing a part, in her case an imitation of her older friend and model, Norma:

> …she and Norma enjoyed classic roles of mentor and novice… There were signs of this tutelage in Maureen's … every studied mannerism … and her endless supply of anecdotes … [that made up] a confectionery Hollywood romance of bachelor-girls in Manhattan. (100)

A girl who is striving to play a role in 'a confectionery Hollywood romance' (100) is the ideal mistress for Frank. When they sleep together, she stays committedly in character: although she has short hair she tosses her head '*as if* to toss back a smooth, heavy lock of hair', and arranges her face in 'a drawing-room comedy smile' (104, my emphasis).

Though he initially feels that this affair is, unlike the rest of his life, a fantasy 'daydream' 'perfectly fulfilled' (264), Frank begins to find Maureen inadequate. He complains to himself that 'so much of her talk [rings] false', that any real feeling is papered over by 'the stylized ceremony of its cuteness' (99). Frank needs to believe that the fantasy is real, that Maureen truly is the character of the glamorous Manhattan single girl, and that his own acted part when they are together is equally authentic: 'a portrait of himself as decent but disillusioned young family man' who is 'sadly and bravely at war with his environment' (101). Any suggestion that his fantasy is all an act would bring the whole mimetic edifice toppling down.

For this reason Frank doesn't cope very well when reality is different to his fantasies, which of course keeps—most inconveniently—happening. Before the Laurel Players' performance he spends the day imagining April shining on the stage, and himself 'rising to join a thunderous ovation' (12), afterwards backstage 'glowing and disheveled, pushing his way through jubilant backstage crowds to claim her first tearful kiss' (12). But 'nowhere in these plans had he foreseen the weight and shock of reality' (12). After the Paris plan begins, while at work he imagines April at home 'taking long baths and devoting whole hours to the bedroom mirror, trying on different dresses and new ways of fixing her hair' (140), arranging the scenes in his mind like a theatre director,[45] having April 'perhaps leaving the mirror only to waltz lightly away on the strains of imaginary violins' before 'whirling in a dream through the sunlit house and returning to smile over her shoulder at her own flushed image' (140). He gets home and is shocked to find that instead she has been putting on sturdy shoes and marching all over the city, busying herself organising passports and researching ocean liners (140).

The same kind of disappointment attacks Frank at work, when he is distinguished for writing some good sales material and invited to meet a senior manager about a possible promotion. Although he is planning to move to Paris, he goes along with the meeting because he cannot resist the opportunity to play out a scene that will feed his always-hungry fantasy of himself as the applauded hero: 'He had imagined [Pollock] striding across the carpet with hand outstretched… they might adjourn to do business over a brace of Tom Collinses in some air-conditioned cocktail lounge' (251). The reality is different:

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[45] Mrs Givings also imagines her life as a kind of play, with herself in the director's chair. In her 'mind's eye' she pictures the Wheelers seated in her backyard, April smiling and 'pretty', Frank 'engaged in one of his earnest conversations with John, who was reclining … on a white wrought-iron chaise longue' (167), and 'the picture kept recurring for days until it was as real as a magazine illustration' (168). The point, of course, is that a magazine illustration is not real. But for the inhabitants of Revolutionary Road, 'as real as a magazine illustration' exactly the kind of artificial reality they desire.

> Instead they were sitting stiff and damp under the irritating buzz of an electric fan. The room was smaller than it looked from the outside, and Pollock [was] wearing a surprisingly cheap summer shirt through which the outlines of his soaked undershirt were clearly visible... (251)

After this disappointment, Frank consoles himself with another fantasy: at home that evening, he will wryly mock his career but April will insist on praising his abilities with wifely pride—"And it probably *is* the best sales promotion piece they've ever seen—what's so funny about that?" (186). In fact, April displays no interest in his work as she is focused on organising their Parisian escape.

The novel contains a brief, telling vignette illustrative of the gap between fantasy and reality. Frank's colleague, Jack, frequently regales his workmates with stories of his glamorous life. The star of the picture is his wife Sally, 'the former debutante, the chic, childless wife' and object of the other men's envy (88). Frank has always pictured their high-rise apartment 'as a kind of Noël Coward stage setting', until he finally visits and finds a grotesque and decaying imitation of glamour: 'Sally was massively soft and wrinkled, a sodden, aging woman with lips forever painted in the petulant cupid's bow of her youth' (88). Frank is disgusted, but does not see the microcosm of his own world that this scene suggests: he and April are no less determinedly playing out their own faux-glamorous drama on the artificial stage-set of their home.

After the disastrous play, April seems increasingly disinclined to accept Frank's theatrical gestures and remains coldly unmoved by his recitals (33). This rejection offends Frank deeply, and he accuses her of being a fake, acting like a fictional character: "'It strikes me," he said at last, "that there's a considerable amount of bullshit going on here. I mean you seem to be doing a pretty good imitation of Madame Bovary here…'" (26).

It is important to him that April's love for him is *real*, not an act, and when she behaves as if she doesn't love him he is outraged and accuses her of acting like a character in a 'damn Noël Coward' play, 'denigrating every halfway decent human value with some cute, brittle, snobbish little thing to say' (235). This is despite Frank being very happy to think of himself in terms of role-playing, as 'an intense, nicotine-stained, Jean-Paul Sartre sort of man' (23). In his lack of self-awareness he is intensely bothered by the suspicion that April speaks to him with 'a quality of play-acting, of slightly false intensity, a way of seeming to speak less to him than to some romantic abstraction' (108). But Frank has put an enormous amount of effort into projecting that romantic abstraction and what he is really upset about is that the cracks in it are beginning to show.

Even when he and April fight, Frank is as aware as any stage actor of his chosen posture and tone of voice. In arguments, he casts himself in the unassailable role of The Man In The Right, 'allowing his voice to grow heavy and rich with common sense' (152). He is bewildered when she doesn't cry when he expects her to, since that 'was what usually happened in the movies' (305); conversely, he is delighted when at the peak of their argument he delivers 'the perfect exit line' (307). When he senses the time has come for an apology, he goes into their bedroom and sits on the bed, 'slumped on its edge in a classic pose of contrition' (33). When this posturing doesn't work, Frank assumes another, declaring a desire to lay down their rhetorical weapons and 'just cut it out and start acting like human beings for a change' (57). It is significant that Frank says '*acting* like human beings'—April sees his appeal as just another casting call, to assume yet another set of pretend roles, the Reconciling Couple, and she rejects the job offer with a curt, 'I'm afraid not, thanks. I'm tired of playing that game' (57).

We see, then, that *Revolutionary Road* is explicit about the importance of play-acting to its mimetically-driven characters. Given the community's shared commitment to continuing to play their roles, April's resistance to assume her role as the doting wife and mother is a major transgression. As the illusion of their happy marriage wavers, April begins to see her life with Frank as an extended bout of play-acting:

> Oh, for a month or two, just for fun, it might be all right to play a game like that with a boy; but all these years! … What a subtle, treacherous thing it was to let yourself go that way! Because once you'd started it was terribly difficult to stop … (320)

Like Shep in Arizona, April realises that 'the high adventure of pretending to be something [she] was not had led [her] into a way of life [she] didn't want and couldn't stand...' (147). At this point the focus of the novel shifts. The previous eight chapters have been mostly told from Frank's point of view. He sees himself as the protagonist in the story, the hero around whom the action revolves. Though the novel has never really taken Frank seriously in his heroic role—his emotions are shown to be mostly spurious, and his desperate need to protect his role as ridiculous—he has held the narrative spotlight. But in Chapter Nine we are finally alone with April, and she steps into the role of the tragic heroine: stuck in an awful situation which is partially her own fault, and from which the only escape is violent sacrifice. She decides to attempt a home abortion, fully aware that this may result in her death. Of course, she prepares for this gory event with some very careful staging and acting. Frank is aware that their conflict has reached a crisis point, an argument of the night before having come close to physical violence, but that morning:

> The table was carefully set with two places for breakfast. The kitchen was filled with sunlight and with the aromas of coffee and bacon. April was at the stove, wearing a fresh maternity dress, and she looked up at him with a shy smile.

> "Good morning," she said.
>
> Something told him [that] it would be better just to join her in the playing of this game, this strange, elaborate pretense…
>
> "Good morning," he said. (311)

April gives the performance of her career as she acts the part of the happy housewife for Frank, and waves him goodbye from the front door. Then, choking back hysterical sobs, she gathers the props for her sacrificial act.

April's actions then go unrelated by the narrative of the novel. As Aristotle recommends, the violent tragic spectacle takes place offstage (Aristotle xiv). The next scene we read is Milly Campbell seeing the ambulance go past.

After April's death, the community goes through the motions of scapegoating her, casting her as an intrusive pollutant in the community. Milly seems particularly glad that April is gone: April was her rival for Shep's desire, and despite describing April as one of her best friends, Milly is clearly relieved to be the one left standing.

Girard describes the ritual of retelling tragic narrative as a way to repeat and reaffirm the tragic catharsis, based on the blame and expulsion of the scapegoat-victim, to 'keep alive' the 'memory' of the cathartic event (Girard, *VS* 97). Milly revels in the narrative catharsis of telling and retelling the story of April's death, including—crucially—the revelation of the handwritten note that determines April's supposed guilt for her own demise. Milly 'told the story many, many times in the following months' (Yates 343).

Shep is disturbed by Milly's relish for retelling the story of April's death: 'Milly's voice had taken on a little too much of a voluptuous narrative pleasure. She's enjoying this, he thought, watching her… By God, she's really getting a kick out of it' (344). The novel resists Milly's reading and retelling of the tragedy, by showing us not her perspective, but Shep's, and his distaste, as he thinks to himself: 'Why did she have to make such a God damn soap opera out of it?' (347). He flees the room where Milly is 'still talking' (349) and the reader moves with him, away from the retelling of the tragedy.

The narrative then moves to the Givings house, where a similar scene is unfolding. Mrs Givings is talking over and over the tragedy, blaming April as 'unwholesome' (355), rejoicing in her expulsion that has recohered a community which is now made up exclusively of '*our* kind of people' (354). But Mrs Givings' cathartic diatribe is cut off mid-sentence as again the reader is invited to share the point of view, not of the scapegoater, but the one who doesn't want to hear it. Mr Givings has turned off his hearing aid, and the novel closes with a 'welcome, thunderous sea of silence' (355).

Philippa Berry reads Shakespeare's tragedies as problematising death, which often—rather than signifying a tidy closure—is presented as an 'open state' of multiple potential meanings which disrupt the 'orderliness' of 'established significations'. For Berry, it is not a coincidence that this problematisation 'is often emblematically embodied… by a dead or dying woman', the female body acting as a potent symbol of rebellion against dichotomic thinking (Berry 5; See also Bronfen 183–189). Unlike *The Virgin Suicides*, *Revolutionary Road* does not give us intimate access to the female scapegoat's body. We are not given the opportunity to enter Reineke's 'intimate domain' and experience April's flesh as like our own. However, April's body gives us access to an anti-tragic reading another way. The novel community's insistence on binary gender roles,

and the 'established signification' of man/woman, makes April's death a refusal of her place in that binary. In April's final actions are 'emblematically embodied' problematisations of her position as wife, mother, and scapegoat. Her death is potentially productive of various meanings, which the novel presents via the perspectives of different members of the community. In Girardian terms, this lack of closure is anti-tragic, an indication that the narrative is resisting the established catharsis of sacrificial myth and tragedy, and instead making space for subversion.

Read as a victim-text, *Revolutionary Road* shows April as an innocent scapegoat, blamed by her community for crises and contaminations that are not her fault. Read as a persecutor-text, the novel makes April the scapegoat, the intruder who has brought disruption upon them and must be expelled. April indulges in sacrificial thinking herself, when she blames her pregnant body for ruining her life—as if falling pregnant were the inexcusable *hamartia* that means she deserves to suffer. The novel at times encourages the reader to sympathise with all these perspectives. Most often, the fault of the entire community for their various predicaments is clear, and both Frank's attempts to blame April, and April's attempts to blame her pregnancy, are patently absurd. At other moments the text flatters our inclination to scapegoat: to blame the pregnancy alone for their crisis is tempting; April's desire to terminate the pregnancy and redeem their lives seems to offer genuine hope, as if moving to Paris is a genuinely viable solution, and the pregnancy is the only obstacle to redemption.

I have already discussed Girard's early work in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* and its unique ability to depict individual interiority, and thus to reveal and critique the inner workings of the mimetic crisis. The closing pages of *Revolutionary Road* are an excellent example of the way in which the novel can invite the reader to share the interiority of a particular character and his or her point

of view. This shift in narrative perspective, away from Milly and Mrs Givings's acts of scapegoating, is a highly practical method of enacting the subversive power of the anti-tragic.

In *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Ice Storm*, I demonstrated that each novel contained many of the thematic features of ritual and myth identified by Girard, such as undifferentiation, contagion, decay, and monstrosity, which are continued in tragedy, and the treatment of which is significant in terms of cathartic effect. *Revolutionary Road* likewise follows the patterns of myth, and demonstrates significant self-consciousness about its own fictionality, making these tropes the subject *of* the text rather than structural elements within it. This self-consciousness is most frequently demonstrated in the novel's almost excessive references to play-acting, which invite the reader to see its tragic action as a staged performance—an attempted play but ultimately a failed one. Its final response to the performance is a turning-away, a rejection, a silence.

Revolutionary Road invites the reader to share the interiority of the characters who resist the tragic catharsis. *Revolutionary Road* may then be described as a tragedy that rejects tragedy. It depicts the workings of mimetic desire and the momentum towards crisis. It sets up the notion of the tragic stage by making all the characters self-conscious 'actors' on the artificial stage of their lives. It mocks the poses and sufferings of the self-appointed tragic hero, Frank, while quietly provoking some limited sympathy for the real pain of April, who suffers the fate of being stuck in a role she doesn't want to play. The only way off the stage for her is death, and so she becomes the scapegoat of the tragedy. The remaining characters on the stage try to scapegoat her, but the novel resists this and stops listening at the end. It refuses to be a tragedy; refuses to blame the scapegoat; mocks the characters on stage who are going through the tragic motions, and quietly turns away from the tragic spectacle.

Conclusion

Early in this thesis I asked, 'what is tragedy, and what does it do?' I hope here to have demonstrated that one thing tragedy does is repeat the shapes and schemes of myth and ritual, performing a sacrificial catharsis in narrative form. Additionally, I have attempted to show that this sacrificial catharsis may be undermined by what I call 'anti-tragic' texts, which display all the characteristic features of tragedy but deploy them in ways that problematise the sacrifice of the scapegoat.

I have demonstrated that the novel genre is significant to the ways in which *The Virgin Suicides*, *The Ice Storm*, and *Revolutionary Road* perform these 'anti-tragic' operations. Noting the novel form's particular ability to depict individual interiority and to provide a 'narrative voice-over', I turn to existing Girardian scholarship on the function of the novel for more particular tools to utilise. Underpinning my study is Cesareo Bandera's contention that the Judeo-Christian narrative expulsion of sacred violence makes possible a new kind of literary fiction—modern narratives which luxuriate in self-consciousness and freedom from the constraint of classical proscriptions that concealed the mechanisms of mimesis and sacrifice. I take from Thomas Cousineau the idea that this self-consciousness creates a contrast between the narrator's perspective and that of the reader, who may experience 'demystification' not available to the narrator. I also draw upon Michiel Heyns' observations that the novel self-consciously participates in 'reciprocity of meaning' with other narratives and traditions, approaching my chosen novels as modern tragedies, capable of criticising the culture of their production, and in dialogue with the tragic genre and its roots in ritual and myth.

My analysis of these particular twentieth-century American novels is deliberately situated in the context of the notion of the American Dream. The Girardian principle that democracy

promotes competition, while simultaneously frustrating individual progress by instituting a mass of rivals, led me to characterise the American Dream as a catalyst for mimetic crisis. I read two texts on the subject of the Dream for their discussion and negotiation of the imagined American Dream, which the authors themselves describe as a foundational myth. I suggest that a culture which builds a mythology of itself based on competitive acquisition of objects of desire, pursuing ontological fullness via the sacrificial mechanisms of this acquisitory system, is a culture that will produce narratives that engage with this mythology and the crises it engenders. By beginning with an analysis of Cullen's *The American Dream*, and Delbanco's *The American Dream*, I demonstrate a thematic continuity between the broader 'tragic' picture of American culture depicted in those scholarly works, and the microcosms of the Dream represented in the novels I examine. My analysis of *Death of a Salesman,* as a text that embodies this continuity, showed that it makes explicit critical commentary on the myth of the American Dream using the tropes and techniques of tragedy. As I demonstrate, *Salesman* is a textual and cultural precursor to the even more explicit anti-tragic manouevres in the three novels.

In *The Virgin Suicides*, I note many of the themes that Girard locates in sacrificial ritual and myth: mimetic crisis with its symptoms of contagion, decay, pollution, and undifferentiation; the crisis reflected in the environment; the failure of rites of passage and initiation; eligible scapegoats with characteristics such as marginality, monstrosity, and isolation, and a sacrificial expulsion, followed by divinisation of the scapegoats, collective catharsis and reunification. I also find the problematisation of that catharsis by the narrators' incomplete awareness of the Lisbon sisters as innocent victims, placing some responsibility upon the community and culture that drove them 'over the cliff'. I use Martha Reineke's notion of the 'intimate domain' to show that the novel allows the reader to intimately empathise with the Lisbon sisters' bodies as human and knowable, while the narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* are stuck in their conception of the girls as physically and essentially Other, limiting their insight into the tragic mechanism. The

reader, however, may follow the Cousineauian 'clues' to discover that the novel is self-consciously engaging with the tropes of tragedy, and undermining those tropes to anti-tragic effect.

The Ice Storm also engages repeatedly, though at times ironically, with the familiar features of tragedy, and I argue that this is evidence of the novel's participation in the tragic tradition—in contrast to the Ang Lee film adaptation that presents neither crisis nor catharsis. Given the novel's profuse references to imitative desire and competitive crisis, its recurring atmosphere of filth, rot, and contagion, and the depiction of taboo and harmful acts by its major scapegoat, Benjamin Hood, I ask whether the novel contained any anti-tragic potential, rather than simply being a sacrificial tragedy. I found this potential in this very abundance of tragic signifiers: just as Girard suspected Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* of being *too* tragic, loaded with 'elusive tragic subversion' which 'challenges the basis of the myth' in 'muted and devious fashion' (Girard 78), I argue that *The Ice Storm*'s 'reciprocity of meaning' with sacrificial tragedy is self-conscious, going so far as to describe itself as a 'modern tale [that] features ordeal and dismemberment' (Moody 215). In depicting Benjamin's 'ordeal' with irony, even mockery, the novel's atmosphere of rot and crisis reads as protesting too much about the tragic imperative to sacrifice, calling such imperative into doubt. I also argue that the various acts of sacrifice in the novel do not result in redemption or restoration, which further undermines the ideal of tragic catharsis.

Revolutionary Road offered an opportunity to examine a text that is very self-conscious about staging, plays, and acting. I establish, again, that the novel follows Girard's pattern of tragic narrative: protagonists frustrated by mimetic desire, building to rivalry and crisis, the crisis then interrupted by the violent death of an eligible scapegoat. I argue that the capacity of *Revolutionary Road* to function as a tragedy, and its particular 'anti-tragic' power, is derived

directly from its engagement with the notion of play-acting. *Revolutionary Road* not only depicts characters whose everyday identities are highly theatrical, but it actually opens with a theatrical performance, the failure of which echoes through the rest of the novel. This multi-layered effect of imagined characters pretending to be imagined characters invites a reading that is aware of the novel itself as a performance, the text performing that 'self-consciousness' which I argue is useful for subversion of sacrificial narratives. As I show, *Revolutionary Road* is quite explicit in such subversion, as in the final pages of the novel the narrative perspective shifts away from those engaged in cathartic repetitions of the myth of April's death, instead inviting the reader to share the interiority of those who reject such catharsis—a manouvre uniquely possible and potent in the novel genre. Additionally, I consider the significance of April's female body to her position as scapegoat, and argue that her act of self-harm is a rejection of the novel community's reduction of her value to that of her reproductive organs. April's refusal to play her role, her denunciation of this female identity of wife and mother, is performed not merely with words but enacted upon her own body. As I show, this embodied problematisation of traditional systems of difference, upon which ritual, myth and tragedy rest, could have been presented simply as a taboo act by a guilty scapegoat. However, the novel's eventual 'taking sides' with those who do not scapegoat April invites sympathy and acquittal, a subversion of the tragic catharsis.

My analysis of *The Virgin Suicides*, *The Ice Storm*, and *Revolutionary Road* is a significant contribution to the work of second-generation Girardian scholars. In showing that these novels are rich in the features that Girard traces from ritual through myth to tragedy, I strengthen the Girardian claim that tragedies are sacrificial scapegoat-rituals in narrative form. I take up Girard's minor remarks about the 'anti-mythical' nature of modern tragedies due to Judeo-Christian narrative influence, and greatly extend this speculation into a detailed analysis of how such modern tragedies enact their anti-tragic subversions. I thus demonstrate that Girardian

theory is a useful tool for analysing modern texts as narratives in dialogue with the entire story-arc of ritual and myth.

Using Heyns's concept of 'reciprocity of meaning' – of novels producing some of their meaning by their reflection of previous texts and traditions – this thesis contributes to the growing scholarly case for the legitimacy of considering novels as part of the genre and tradition of tragedy. While scholarship on tragedy has often limited the genre to theatrical and performance forms, my close reading of these texts for a plethora of tragic tropes makes a convincing argument that these novels are reflecting upon, and participating in, the tragic tradition.

Having achieved the above, my thesis invites further research into a number of areas. I have offered evidence that a novel may function as a tragedy, which invites further thinking about the novel form as participating in the tragic tradition. Such explorations might consider novels as tragedies not only in the Girardian sense but more broadly, by those interested in the multiplicity of perspectives on tragedy that criticism has taken over the centuries, be they Aristotelian or Nietzschean, ancient or modern.

The fact that each of my chosen novels has been made into a successful film also invites further consideration of the relationship between tragedy and film, upon which I touched in my chapter on *The Ice Storm*. Given that films are arguably a more broadly disseminated part of modern popular culture than novels or stage plays, the capacity of film to perform a tragic or anti-tragic function is of contemporary relevance. I would suggest that the genre of film unites some of the capacities of both the novel and drama forms, for instance, the novel's interior, narratorial voice-over, and the stage's visual powers of spectacle—the tragic significance of which has been extensively theorised (see, for example, Samet 1315; Bergmann et al. 15, 128; Sutherland 332). Such a capacity may allow films both to participate in the visual and narrative

traditions of tragedy, and to stray from its prescriptions in deliberately subversive ways. For example, in my analysis of Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* I mentioned that the film version elides most of the novel's references to rot and decay, but I did not examine the ways in which this is rendered visually. An analysis of the cinematographic aesthetics of Lee's film—which has been described as 'overcast, autumnal… chilly… heavy on the ice imagery' (Ansen 72)—might focus on the tradition of visceral spectacle in stage tragedy, and on Lee's choice to strew his 'stage' not with bodies but with snow and ice.[46]

Feminist Girardian scholarship is a nascent endeavour. Martha Reineke has brought Girardian theory to Kristevan notions of sensory experience and intimacy in various non-fiction and fiction texts; I have built upon this by demonstrating that physical intimacy and notions of embodiment are important to our experience of the scapegoat's body in a tragic text, and that the physical body is particularly relevant to the female scapegoats in my chosen novels. Whereas Mike Williams and Benjamin Hood are described in visceral terms, the maleness of their bodies is not dwelt upon. By contrast, those female victims' bodies are victimised in part because of their femaleness, and it is their female bodies that are the source of anti-tragic textual power. My attention to the female bodies of April Wheeler, Cecilia, Lux, Bonnie, Mary, and Therese Lisbon, extends Girardian scholarship in its consideration of women as scapegoats, and the particular ways in which tragedy and anti-tragedy may utilise the womanhood of the scapegoat to achieve cathartic or subversive ends. I demonstrate that the narratorial attitude towards the female bodies of these women is directly relevant to their

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[46] Similar attention might be paid to the audiovisual aesthetics in Sofia Coppola's film adaptation of Th*e Virgin Suicides*, such as Coppola's use of a specially commissioned soundtrack by the band Air: the girls often appear accompanied by a shimmering aural tone that is otherworldly, even unnatural. A sustained analysis of the non-verbal cues in Coppola's film may find that such cues are modern, filmic evolutions of the Othering 'marks of persecution' that Girard identifies in scapegoat-myths. Further research may find that many modern films are deploying the tropes of myth and tragedy in new ways with new technologies.

eligibility as Girardian scapegoats: the ideal scapegoat is entirely guilty, and yet each of these heroines is presented as doubtfully culpable for her death. I show that in each case, narratorial ambivalence about each woman's guilt stems from broader ambivalence about her position or identity as a woman *per se*, and that attention to gender is therefore essential to an accurate Girardian analysis of these tragedies. This justifies further research into the presentation of female scapegoats and female bodies in tragedies generally, in both theatrical and novel forms, with attention to the ways in which it matters that the scapegoat is a woman.

My suggestions about the mimetic nature of the American Dream are limited to examining its textual representation in a small selection of recent books. Girard's remarks on modern democracy have not yet been developed by Girardian scholarship into a specific analysis of North American society and culture. This thesis is an examination of literary texts; more might be done not only on American texts, but in applying Girardian theory to American history, social issues, politics and war, and so forth.

The events of World War II hover at the periphery of my thesis. Each of my chosen texts was written in the second half of the twentieth century, and various features of post-war culture—from consumerism to gender roles—were relevant to my readings. What I did not explore was the impact of the Holocaust on these post-war texts. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the prominent Girardian scholar Sandhor Goodhart has written extensively about the Holocaust and its implications as a 'revelatory spectacle', unmasking the scapegoat-mechanism in such a way as to be unforgettable: post-Shoah 'it is no longer possible to conceive of the human without conceiving at the same time of murder' (Goodhart, *Commentary* 253). Goodhart has focused on the implications of this irreversible shift for the theological and philosophical disciplines. My thesis invites serious consideration of post-war fiction, especially tragedy, as responding particularly to the 'revelatory spectacle' of the Holocaust.

In deploying a rich and vivid array of tragic tropes, *The Virgin Suicides*, *The Ice Storm*, and *Revolutionary Road* participate in what I have argued is a deep-rooted American tragic tradition—a culture of myths about communities plagued by mimetic desire and crisis, turning to sacrifice for cathartic relief. But in various ways, each of the novels brings ambiguity and even mockery to their treatment of the characters in crisis. The conventional guilt of the tragic scapegoat becomes problematised and undermined; reliabilities are challenged, and characters' self-deceptions revealed. The novels' self-consciousness about sacrifice thereby allows the reader to resist the tragic scapegoat-mechanism.

In the years while this thesis was researched, debates about difference and violence in North America became increasingly heated. The 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin prompted a national conversation about the stereotyping of young black men as dangerous Others, culminating in the #BlackLivesMatter movement that continues to draw attention to state-sanctioned violence enacted upon the bodies of African-Americans. Sociologists are tracking the rise of Islamophobia since 9/11 (see Bilici 133–137); and contemporary fear of Muslims at times resembles medieval superstition, as in the recent case of Texan townspeople protesting a Muslim cemetery for fear that Muslim corpses would poison their land (Millward n.p.). Such radical casting of difference as supernaturally Other is familiar from Girard's cataloguing of scapegoat-myths. In Australia, similar suspicion has been focused on the bodies of Muslim women, rendered as Other and threatening by the visual spectacle of head-coverings (see, for example, "Burqa Debate"). Fear and suspicion has boiled over into violence, as evidenced at the Reclaim Australia rallies in July 2015, violence which I would argue has sacrificial and cathartic elements. Meanwhile, the suffering of those in offshore immigration detention goes on, yet more bodies of ostensible Others serving as scapegoats for communal Australian anxieties.

In such a historical context, the 2014 *PMLA* special edition on 'The Urgency of Tragedy Now' seems especially timely. In this thesis, I have shown that this urgency may be met not only by tragedy in its dramatic forms but also by modern novels that participate in the evolution of that genre. In fact, one of the best-selling American novelists of recent years is David Vann, who has repeatedly and explicitly categorised his novels *Goat Mountain* and *Dirt* as tragedies (Breathnach n.p.; Touitou n.p.).[47] Though Vann describes these recent works as 'Greek tragedies', following the classical pattern of crisis and violence, he also reflects upon the way that the Judeo-Christian Bible 'shaped [his] imagination', especially the treatment of 'killing' in the story of Cain and Abel (Breathnach n.p.). He suggests that 'it might be the most important story in the Bible, the one the others all branch off from', since Scriptural narrative as a whole depicts humanity as the 'descendants of Cain'—in other words, perpetrators of unjust violence. Vann's works are participating in both the long tradition of sacrificial tragedy, and the anti-tragic vision of Judeo-Christian narrative—and doing so with more explicitness, and more cultural prominence, than the twentieth century novels I have examined. Tragedy may here be observed continuing to evolve into the troubled modern genre of anti-tragedy, through the medium of the novel.

This is not to say that all tragic novels belong to the subcategory of anti-tragedies, or that it is only in the novel form that tragedy may become anti-tragic—I have argued, for example, that *Death of a Salesman* is an anti-tragedy in the drama form. Rather, in this thesis I have shown that tragedy is evolving from simple repetitions of scapegoat-myth to more complex and problematic narratives that throw doubt on the guilt of the scapegoat—from Sophocles'

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[47] My grateful thanks to Lucy Potter and Chelsea Avard, who pointed me to Vann's work and provided some useful sources.

Antigone through to the novels I analyse—and that the novel form may be particularly good at rendering this complexity.

As we have seen, Girardian theory makes a strong case that tragedy inherits the function of sacrificial myth and ritual, and suggests that it may also criticise and undermine the Othering of the scapegoat and the catharsis of violent sacrifice. My analysis of *The Virgin Suicides*, *The Ice Storm*, and *Revolutionary Road* fleshes out this suggestion and demonstrates that modern tragedies can and do function as anti-tragedies, participating in the richness of tragic tradition but inverting its traditional final effect. The novel is a literary form that allows for the depiction of complex and intimate interiority. The Other becomes a knowable Someone, a mind to meet, a body with which to empathise. Compassion disrupts catharsis. Tragedy is transposed.

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